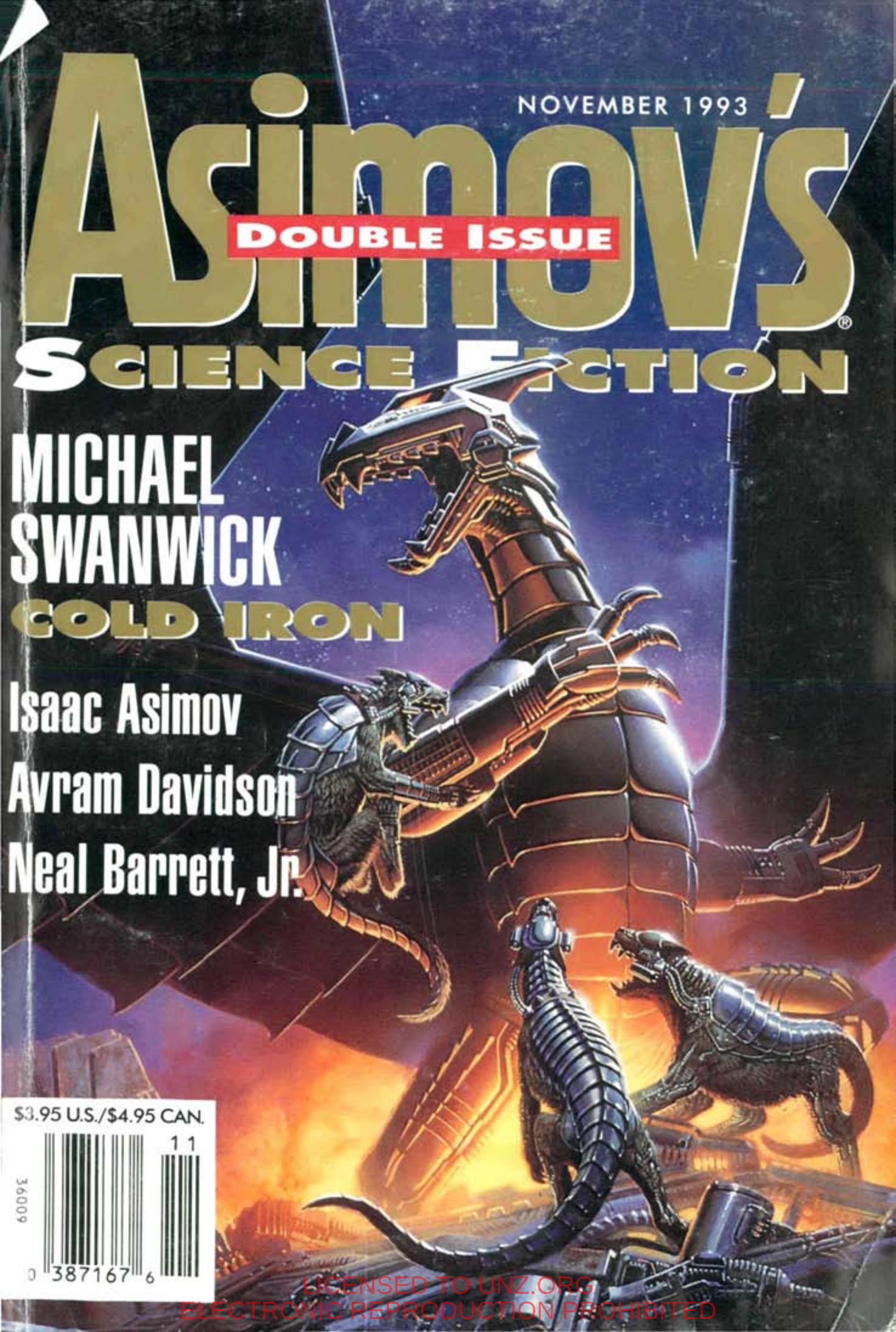

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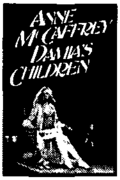
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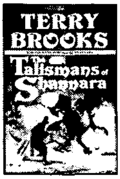
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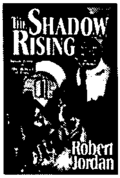
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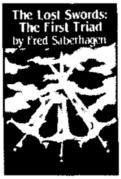
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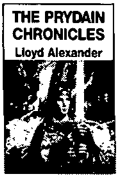
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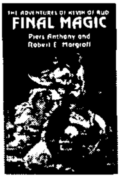
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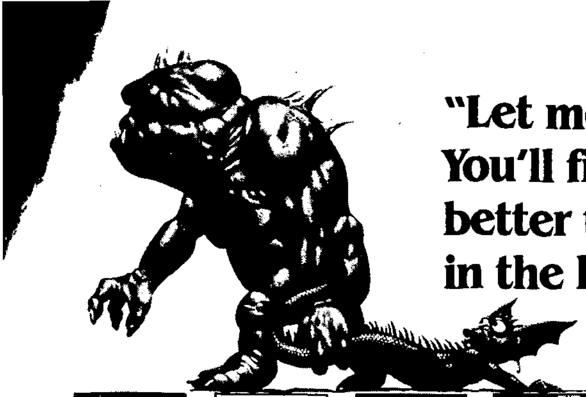

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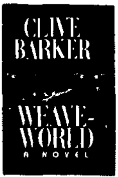
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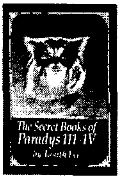
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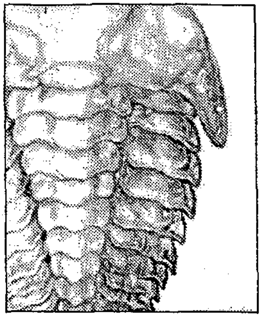

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GUEST EDITORIAL

MORE ISAAC ASIMOV, HIMSELF

by Janet Asimov

Forgive me, but I couldn't deny myself the pleasure of putting together one more compilation of Isaac's thoughts, primarily those about love. But don't expect a lot of purple prose. While Isaac had much to say about the romantic aspects of life, the irrefutable and well-known fact is that—first and foremost—Isaac was a writer, in love with writing.

[After singing "Auld Lang Syne" in the shower, he emerged crying and I asked why.]

Well, I wasn't thinking of my mother and father in the candy store, but of being eighteen and walking into Campbell's office, and I got the overwhelming feeling that I wanted to go back in time so I could do it *right*. Then I realized that I *did* do it right.

If I were twenty and practiced the piano every day, I think I'd learn to play, but there are people who seem to be born with the ability to play by ear. I once said to one of them, with venom, "Unlike the rest of us, everything you have to know in order to play the piano is right there in your head, so you can do it easily!"

He said to me, "Listen, you know what word comes after another word, don't you?"

Then I shut up.

[At a dinner party] . . . she said to me, "All the sociologists . . . swear by your book *The End of Eternity*. It is the perfect textbook on Markov processes."

She must have been badly disillusioned when . . . I said, "Good Lord, what are Markov processes?" . . . I looked it up and found a long passage that begins, "A Markov process is a process for which, if the present is given, the future and past are independent of each other. More precisely—" and from then on for four columns of small print I understand not a single word. In my book, I illuminate without understanding, I guess.

* * *

I met a copyreader from *Science Digest Quarterly* who said she'd copyread my latest article and found it fascinating.

I was pleased—since copyreaders have to read in a meticulous, painstaking fashion, then if they still like it, that's praise.

[A scientist] said my books had completely changed the intellectual direction of his life, and he owed his present attitudes and ways of thought to me. He thanked me for it, but I said I wrote books hoping I would help people, and that people like him who were helped give meaning to my life —and for that I thanked him.

It's interesting—I can be with a bunch of people who have never heard of me or may have known I've written a couple of novels, and when they see "author, lecturer, scientist" applied to me, they don't take it seriously even after they ask, "what do you mean, scientist?" and I say, "I have a Ph.D. in chemistry."

But let me make up a clever limerick on a name or on a topic they suggest, doing it in front of their eyes, then they suddenly believe I'm intelligent.

[Isaac wrote this limerick, of course, plus the words in parentheses below it:]

Our Isaac's a speaker of fame
With letters right after his name
He's the best you will see
Ask him, her, or *me*—

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You'll find that I'll tell you the same.

(Title: No False Modesty. Isaac Asimov, 9 Aug. 81)

Fam[illegible]s odd—I went from being a promising beginner to a grand old man, with nothing in between . . . how did it happen?

I have been philosophizing on what makes a useful and full life. . . The construction I have made of my life keeps me busy but doesn't necessarily give it meaning. It fills my life but doesn't make it full. It gains me admiration but the admiration is tautological for it only confirms me in my own opinion. I have known for as long as I can remember that I am extremely intelligent and being told so adds nothing new.

However . . . when a friend said to me, "You're good," I was so foolishly pleased that I floated on air. You see, I am *not* good. I have a ferocious temper; I am as easily offended as a Spanish grandee at any failure, however slight, to appreciate my brilliance; . . . I am so distressingly self-centered that only those who love me very much can forgive me for it, and that just barely; I am selfish, stingy, overtalkative, under-listenative, and a number of other things.

Yet I love to be told I am good. Why? Not because it convinces me that I am, in any absolute sense. But because it convinces me that I impress another in such a way that that person thinks I am good. For that person, I *am* good. There is one person who finds me good. That is a very wonderful thing, for intelligence you are born with and cannot help, and many very horrible and disgusting people have been luminously intelligent. Ditto, good looks; ditto, good health; ditto, musical talent or writing ability; ditto, almost everything.

But the capacity to be good, to make someone happy, is a creation of yourself; a very difficult thing to create; a very rewarding thing.

To me it seems to be important to believe people to be good even if they tend to be bad, because your own joy and happiness in life is increased in that way, and the pleasures of the belief outweigh the occasional disappointments. To be a cynic about people works just the other way around and makes you incapable of enjoying the good things.

All human beings are, in themselves, incomplete. To form a complete "human being" each one must find its complementary fit. The task is difficult, for there are a great many human beings among whom the complementarity is lost, and it may even be that he (or she) doesn't exist.

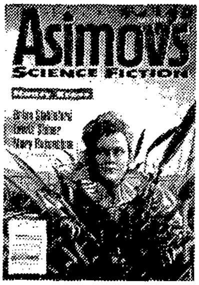
But when one finds the other, it seems to me that it is as though life passes from black-and-white into Technicolor.

To how few must life be Technicolor. And of those few, to what large proportion must the Technicolor have faded and washed out after a few weeks or months. But for some, the colors steadily intensify and grow more luminously brilliant. . . .

I have a private definition of beauty. It goes: the beauty of a person is directly proportional to the happiness she or he brings. . . . Those with the pattern of features called "beautiful" will grow less beautiful with age; as skin wrinkles and eyes dim and features fade, only the inner beauty is left. Those who possess that never grow old but shine the more graciously as the superficial sophistry of plane and curve collapses. . . .

[After getting an award] I respond with mixed emotions to these awards because I can't feel they are properly deserved. The awards one expects out of life are really matters that aren't considered awards. For instance, one can love with ardor and passion, and then get the one award that counts—love in return. Except then, I am not certain what the award is: being loved, or being given permission to love. Or perhaps the two are the same thing and melt together into one great inexpressible entirety.

[After going to a party where a striptease film was shown] The striptease is obviously the acting out of an exaggerated bout of sex in public, vertical instead of horizontal, and without a man. I tried



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hard to overcome a sense of prudish shock. It seemed so pathetic that a woman should have to make a living in this fashion and equally pathetic that an audience should have to watch for default of anything better—and I was a little indignant that something which I prize very highly should be exposed in this undignified manner. I frequently have the feeling that I have invented sex and patented it and that any infringement on the patent is to be strongly resented. But my patent includes certain features, such as true love, which can never be represented by a stripteaser.

I would not want to live in a weather paradise like southern California or Hawaii. [In the Northeast] the change in rotten weather from one kind of rotten to another kind of rotten is very stimulating and keeps you on the move and the thoughts racing. To live in a salubrious climate just gets you lying under palm trees while coconut milk is dribbled into your mouth by a native girl and nothing *gets done*. (Well, nothing *else* gets done.)

[We were driving along a highway on our way to another one of his speaking engagements and suddenly I burst out with:]

"I'm so happy being married to you, Isaac."

[Isaac sang] With all my faults—

[I continued the song] "I love you still"

[He finished the song] It had to be me, wonderful me, it had to be me! [I didn't hit him—I was laughing too hard].

[After he read me Dorothy Parker's sardonic poem about the girl who gets one perfect rose instead of a perfect Cadillac, I said I'd prefer one carnation. He brought home a gardenia. After complaining about its smell, he suddenly remembered carnation and said:]

I've spent my whole life in the realization that though nobody I know is smarter than I am in some ways, no one I know is dumber than I am in other ways.

"Isaac, darling, I hope my criticism of your choice of clothes—I mean what goes with what—hasn't undermined your confidence in your artistic judgment."

Nonsense, dear. I have lots of confidence. What I don't have is artistic judgment.

"I'm sure you can't doubt your writing ability, Isaac."

On the contrary, every once in a while I have to open up one of my own books to make sure I can write.

"But what's it really like to write as easily as you do?"

For one thing I can't help it. It's just the way it is. I look inside my head and see the whole story written out. Consciousness—the part I consider me—is an executive that hooks into all the subordinates that do the scut work so I can check on what I'm doing with the story in my head, without interfering with all the other things I'm doing.

[His advice about "limping transitions" in first drafts.]

So what if it limps. Its purpose is to get you into the next stage of the story and you take off from there. Time enough when you go through the novel again to correct the transition. For all you know, the material that you will write much later in the novel will make it plain to you exactly how that transition ought to have been. No amount of rewriting and repolishing now will get it right in the absence of knowledge of the course of the entire book. So let it limp and get on with it. . . . Think of yourself as an artist making a sketch to get the composition clear in his mind, the blocks of color, the balance and the rest. With that done, you can worry about the fine points.

I get pleasure rereading my own stuff because when it goes back into my head it fits exactly the places it came out of. Well, that's not really true of my very early stories, because I've changed enough so that now they don't fit—they're just embarrassing.

There is no orgastic pleasure whatever in reading galley proof on a bus . . . the galleys kept slipping this way and that and the motion of the bus kept lulling me to sleep.

The worst moment I had was when I went to the rear to visit the rest room. I took my galleys with me being too paranoid to leave them on my seat. There is a handhold on the side of the restroom so that you don't get killed while the bus careens. I grabbed hold of it with the same hand that held the galleys. Then I waited for something to happen (the mad swaying of the bus back and forth and the certainty of imminent death inhibited the natural urinary process.) As I waited I noticed that my galleys were swinging back and forth with the bus's motion as I held them with two fingers and that if they shook loose they would go *right into the hopper*.

It took me a tenth of a second to put the galleys down in a safe place, but during that tenth of a second, the vision of those galleys in the hopper seared my soul. I still haven't quite recovered.

The only education a writer gets is in reading other people's writing. You should read not through your opinion of whether or not you like something, but to see how the writer does it, why it's effective.

. . . Of course, sometimes it's awfully hard to tell golden drops from shit.

I don't remember much of my childhood, but the books I read are as real as they were then, the people as alive. . . . My three favorite authors are Twain, Dickens, and Wodehouse. By making you laugh at the eccentricities of humanity, they cajole you into recognizing them in yourself.

I can't read Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" ever again. Or the poem in *Little Women* about "oh, my sister, passing from me." Or Andersen's "The Little Match Girl." These are the writings that tear you apart inside, and I read them in childhood, never forgot them, and still cry when I remember them.

I feel sorry for critics, who sit at the rim of creativity and throw the venom of their envy at the creators. . . .

[About a review of "King Lear"] . . . the reviewer complained about the play itself and I was most indignant. He thought that King Lear was a miserable human being. Of *course* he was . . . all through the first half of the play, Lear was unreasonable, autocratic . . . so rotten that one actually ought to sympathize with Goneril and Regan, if one didn't know the end of the play to begin with. The point is not where the people started, but where they ended. Goneril and Regan grow more frozen in villainy steadily to the very end. Lear, however, *changes*. That is the heartbreak and the glory of the play; that at the age of eighty, he is still capable of redemption through suffering. It is the only play I have ever read that makes it clear and understandable that suffering can be a good thing if through it you attain a new view of the universe and of yourself, *even if only for a few hours*.

History is the best thing to reread—and to write. I know history so well that Earth's past is like a rich tapestry to me.

. . . In history, everything's one piece—you pick up history by any strand and the whole thing comes up. . . .

I suppose history books are mainly written by liberals because most conservatives can't write. . . .

Reagan was America's Philip the Second—the architect of Spain's decline because he tried to fight wars with expensive military equipment when his economy was failing.

I'm reading *The Last of the Wine* by Mary Renault. . . . This is straight history, set at the time of the Peloponnesian War with no Gravesian overtones. I am half through and I love it, for you know what a history-buff I am. . . . It is one of those historical novels that are getting increasingly difficult to find—one that treats history with respect and isn't used merely as a vehicle for sex and sadism. (The same might be said of mysteries.) Furthermore, it is most unusual for displaying homosexuality as it exists in a society that approves of it.

It seems to me that a practicing homosexual in our own society must be consumed with unavailing envy over this book, for nothing he can do will make his activity socially approved of—only tolerated, at best.

Yet . . . I am offended that the Greeks should be so certain that the love of a man for a woman is only animal. This arose from their stupid belief in the inferiority of women (though the hetaira was anything but stupid). . . . A man and a woman can experience sex to the fullest . . . with enthusiasm and ardor and caring not how much time was spent on it, yet never once going about it with animal-like disregard of each other or themselves as human beings; never failing to enliven it with humor and sensitivity and conversation; taking sex seriously as the highest aspect of physical unity but never taking it so seriously that the still higher values of mental unity are impaired. Most of all . . . a man and woman in love, when sex is impossible or inadvisable or merely momentarily undesired, can yet find a full and free communion in conversation or in doing something ordinary together or in doing and saying nothing at all but merely being conscious of each other's presence—or, absent from each other, having the partner in thought and knowing one's self to be in the partner's thoughts.

It is easy to imagine an ideal which cannot be fulfilled in practice, or is not, even if it can. It is easy to go through life seeking an ideal and failing to find it. This is particularly easy when someone possesses an intelligence and imagination and a tendency-to-fantasy that make the internally constructed ideal impossibly high—higher even than those constructed by ordinary mortals.

To find an ideal of this kind fulfilled momentarily is a gift from the gods. To find it fulfilled over years without flagging is surely almost more than we have a right to ask of life.

At various times of life, we find ourselves with a handful of blocks of different sizes and shapes, out of which we can build some aspect of life, and it behooves us to build it as beautifully as we can. . . . It stirs my creative nature (after all, I do create artificial lives in my stories) to think that . . . the essential building block is . . . the true love that is impossible to define for those who have never experienced it and unnecessary to define for those who have.

I suppose there are people who are so "lucky" that they are not touched by phantoms and are not troubled by fleeting memory and know not nostalgia and care not for the ache of the past and are spared the feather-hit of the sweet, sweet pain of the lost, and I am sorry for them—for to weep over what is gone is to have had something prove worth the weeping.

[Isaac often said he was grateful for the joy of having work that he loved. While I weep, I try to remember and be grateful that Isaac's joy was so productive and lasted as long as it did, and made so many other people happy.] ●

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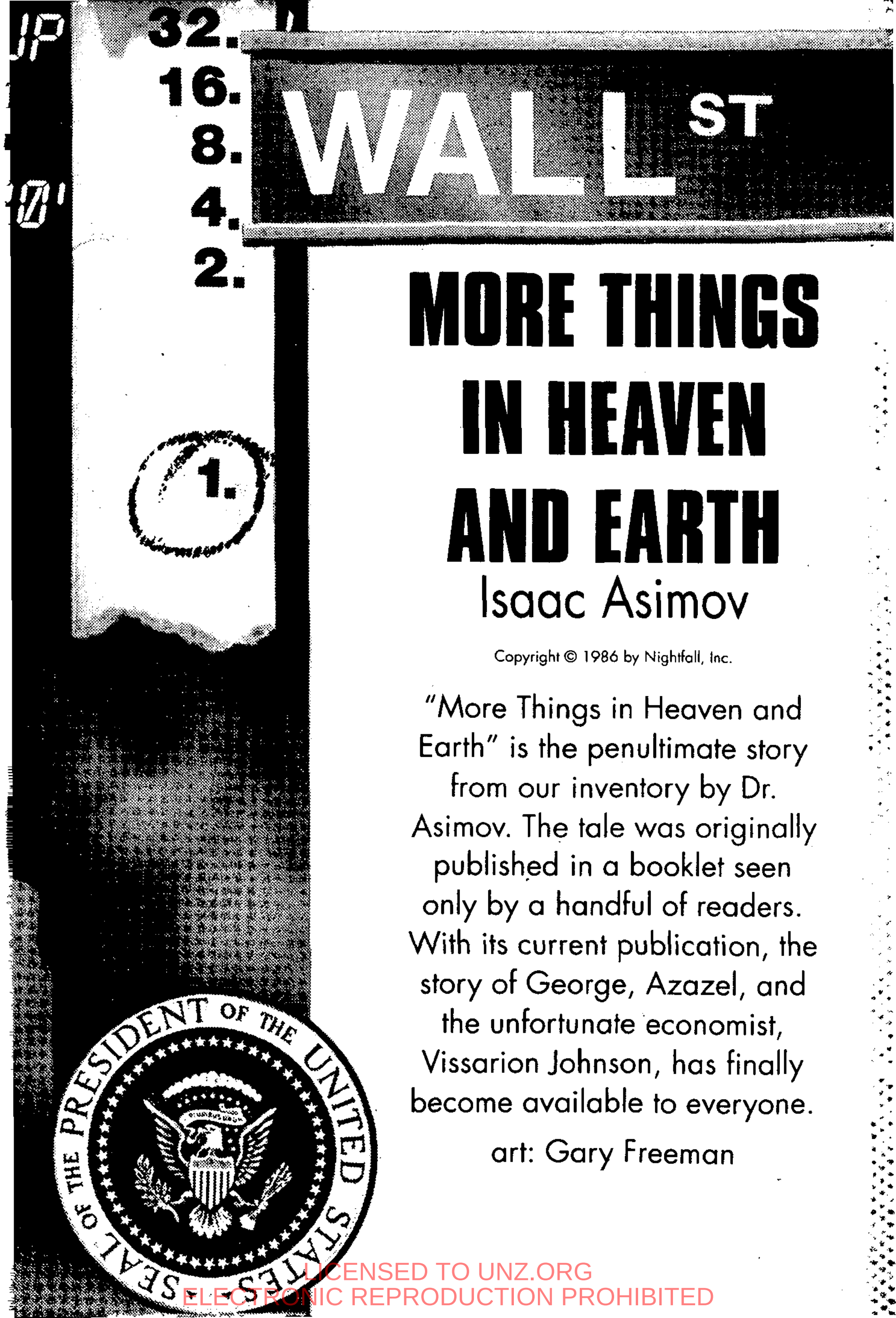
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WALL ST
SEAL OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH

Isaac Asimov

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"More Things in Heaven and Earth" is the penultimate story from our inventory by Dr. Asimov. The tale was originally published in a booklet seen only by a handful of readers. With its current publication, the story of George, Azazel, and the unfortunate economist, Vissarion Johnson, has finally become available to everyone.

art: Gary Freeman

George had been unusually quiet during dinner and had not even bothered to stop me when I took the trouble to tell him a few of the many bon mots I had committed in the course of the last few days. A light sneer at my best mot was all I got out of him.

Then, over dessert (hot blueberry pie à la mode) he heaved a sigh from the bottom of his abdomen, giving me a not entirely welcome reprise of the shrimp scampi he had eaten earlier in the meal.

"What is it, George?" I asked. "Something seems to be on your mind."

"You amaze me," said George, "by showing this unwonted sensitivity. Usually, you are far too wrapped up in your own miserable writing chores to note another's suffering."

"Yes, but as long as I've noted it," I said, "let's not waste the effort it has cost me."

"I was merely thinking of an old friend of mine. Poor fellow. Poor fellow. Vissarion Johnson, his name was. I suppose you never heard of him."

"As it happens," I said, "I never did."

"Well, such is fame, although I suppose it is no disgrace to remain unknown to a person of your limited vision. As it happens, Vissarion was a great economist."

"Surely you jest," I said, "How did you become acquainted with an economist? It sounds like an unusual degree of slumming even for you."

"Slumming? Vissarion Johnson was a man of great learning."

"I don't doubt that for a moment," I said. "It's the integrity of the entire profession I wonder about. There is the story about President Reagan who had grown worried about the federal budget and, in trying to work it out, said to a physicist, 'What is two and two?' The physicist replied at once, 'Four, Mr. President.'

"Reagan considered this a moment, making use of his fingers, and found himself dissatisfied. He therefore asked a statistician, 'What is two and two?' The statistician replied, after some thought, 'The latest poll among fourth graders, Mr. President, reveals a set of answers that averages fairly close to four.'

"But it was the budget that was under question, so Reagan felt he should carry the question to the top. He asked an economist, therefore, 'What is two and two?' The economist pulled down the shades, looked quickly from side to side, then whispered, 'What would you like the answer to be, Mr. President?' "

George did not by word or facial expression indicate any amusement at this. He said, "You clearly know nothing at all about economics, old fellow."

"Neither do economists, George," I said.

"So let me tell you the sad tale of my good friend, the economist, Vissarion Johnson. It happened some years ago."

Vissarion Johnson, as I told you [said George], was an economist who was at or near the top of his profession. He had studied at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he had learned how to write equations of the most abstruse kind, without as much as a tremble of the chalk.

Upon graduation, he entered into practice at once and, thanks to the funds made available to him by a number of clients, learned a great deal about the importance of chance vicissitudes on the daily drift of the stock market. Such was his skill that a few of his clients scarcely lost anything at all.

On a number of occasions he was daring enough to predict that on the morrow the stock market would go either up or down depending on whether the atmosphere was favorable or unfavorable, respectively, and in each case the market did exactly as he had predicted.

Naturally, triumphs such as these made him famous as the Jackal of Wall Street and his advice was sought after by many of the most famous practitioners of the art of making a fast buck.

But he had his eyes fixed on something greater than the stock market; something greater than business machinations; something greater even than the ability to foretell the future. What he wanted was nothing less than the rank of Chief Economist of the United States, or, as this functionary is more familiarly known, "economic adviser to the President."

You, with your limited interests, can scarcely be expected to know the extremely delicate position of Chief Economist. The President of the United States must make the decisions that determine governmental regulations of trade and of business. He must control the money supply and the banks. He must suggest or veto measures that will affect agriculture, commerce, and industry. He must decide the divisions of the tax dollar, determine how much of it goes for the military, and whether anything is left over accidentally for anything else. And in all these things he turns, first and foremost, to the Chief Economist for advice.

And when the President turns to him, the Chief Economist must be able to decide instantly and exactly what it is the President wants to hear, and must give it to him together with the necessary meaningless catchphrases which the President can then, in turn, present to the American public. When you told me the tale of the President, the physicist, the statistician, and the economist, old fellow, I thought for a moment that you understood the delicate nature of the economist's task, but your entirely inappropriate cackle of laughter afterward showed me plainly that you had missed the point altogether.

By the time Vissarion was forty, he had achieved all the qualifications needed for any post, however high. It was widely bruited through the halls of the Institute of Governmental Economics that Vissarion Johnson had not once in the last seven years told anyone anything he or she did not want to hear. What's more, he had been voted into the small circle of the CDR by acclamation.

You, in your inexperience of anything beyond your typewriter, have probably never heard of the CDR, which is the acronym for the Club of Diminishing Returns. In fact, very few people have. Even many among the lower ranks of economists do not know of it. It is the small and exclusive band of economists who have thoroughly mastered the intricate realm of thaumaturgical economics—or as one politician once called it, in his quaintly rustic way, "voodoo economics."

It was well known that no one outside the CDR could make his mark in the federal government but that anyone inside it might. Thus, when the Chairman of the CDR died rather unexpectedly, and a committee of the organization met with Vissarion and offered him the post, Vissarion's heart bounded. As Chairman he would certainly be appointed Chief Economist at the next available opportunity, and he would be at the very fount and source of power, moving the President's own hand in exactly the direction in which the President wanted it to go.

One point, however, worried Vissarion, and left him in a terrible quandary. He felt he needed the help of someone with a level head and a keen intelligence and he turned to me at once, as anyone in that situation naturally would.

"George," he said, "to become the Chairman of the CDR fulfills my greatest hopes and my wildest dreams. It is the open gateway to a glorious future of Economic Sycophancy, in which I may even outstrip that second purveyor of confirmation of all presidential guesses—the Chief Scientist of the United States."

"You mean the scientific advisor to the President."

"If you want to be informal, yes. It needs only for me to become Chairman of the CDR and, within two years, I shall certainly be Chief Economist. Except—"

"Except?" I said.

Vissarion seemed to take a firm grip on himself. "I must go back to the beginning. The Club of Diminishing Returns was founded sixty-two years ago, and the name was chosen because the Law of Diminishing Returns is the one economic law that all economists, however well-trained, have heard of. Its first president, a much beloved figure who predicted in November 1929 that the stock market was due for a serious downturn, was re-elected year after year and remained president for thirty-two years, dying at the patriarchal age of ninety-six."

GEORGE TURNER
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"Very commendable of him," I said. "So many people give up far too soon when it only takes grit and determination to hang on till ninety-six or even beyond."

"Our second Chairman did almost as well, holding the post for sixteen years. He was the only one who did not become Chief Economist. He deserved it and was appointed to the post by Thomas E. Dewey, the day before election day, but somehow— Our third Chairman died after holding the post for eight years, and our fourth died after being Chairman for four years. Our late Chairman, who just died last month, was the fifth in line, and he held the post for two years. Do you see something peculiar about all this, George?"

"Peculiar? Did they all die natural deaths?"

"Of course."

"Well, considering the post they held, that *is* peculiar."

"Nonsense," said Vissarion, with some asperity, "I call your attention to the lengths of time in office for successive chairmen: thirty-two, sixteen, eight, four and two."

I thought for a while. "The numbers seem to grow smaller."

"They don't just grow smaller. Each is exactly half of the previous number. —Believe me, I had it checked by a physicist."

"You know, I think you're right. Has anyone else seen this?"

"Certainly," said Vissarion. "I have shown these figures to my fellow clubmen and they all claim that it is not statistically significant unless the President issues an Executive Proclamation stating that it is. —But don't you see the significance of this? If I accept the post as Chairman, I will die after one year. That is certain. And if I do, it will be extremely difficult for the President to appoint me to the post of Chief Economist thereafter."

I said, "Yes, Vissarion, you are in a dilemma. I have known many governmental functionaries who showed no signs of life behind the forehead, but not one who showed no signs of life *at all*. Give me a day to think on this, will you, Vissarion?"

We made arrangements to meet the next day; same time, same place. It was an excellent restaurant, after all, and, unlike you, old man, Vissarion did not begrudge me a crust of bread.

—All right, then, he didn't begrudge me shrimp scampi, either.

It was obviously a case for Azazel and I felt thoroughly justified in putting my small two-centimeter demon to work at this, with his otherworldly technology.

After all, not only was Vissarion a kindly man with a good taste in restaurants but I honestly felt he could do our nation great service in confirming the President's notions against the objections of people with better judgment. After all, who had elected *them?*

Not that Azazel was glad to be called up. He no sooner saw me then he threw down the contents of his little hands. They were too small for me to make out very clearly but they seemed to be little pasteboard rectangles of curious design.

"There!" he said, his tiny face contorted and turning a rich yellow with rage. His small tail lashed wildly and the miniature horns on his forehead fairly vibrated in the grip of his strong emotion.

"Do you realize, you vile huge mass of inferiority," he shrilled, "that I finally held in my hand a zotchil; and not only a zotchil, but a zotchil with cumin high and pair of reils to boot. They were all bidding me up and I couldn't lose. I would have cleaned up every half-bletchke on the table."

I said, severely, "I don't know what you're talking about, but it does sound as though you have been gambling. Is that a refined and civilized thing to do? What would your poor mother say if she knew you were spending your time gambling with a group of bums?"

Azazel seemed taken aback. Then he mumbled, "You are right. My mothers would be broken-hearted. All three of them. Especially my poor middle-mother, who sacrificed so much for me." And he broke into soprano howls that were quite dreadful to hear.

"There, there," I said, soothingly. I ached to stick my fingers in my ears, but that would have offended him. "You can make it all well by helping a worthy being of this world."

I told him the story of Vissarion Johnson.

"Hmm," said Azazel.

"What does that mean?" I asked, anxiously.

"It means, hmm," snapped Azazel. "What else do you think it could possibly mean?"

"Yes, but don't you think that all this is merely coincidence and that Vissarion ought to disregard it?"

"Possibly—were it not that all this can't be coincidence and that Vissarion dare not disregard it. It has to be the working out of a law of nature."

"How can it be a law of nature?"

"Do you think you know all the laws of nature?"

"Well, no!"

"Of course not. Our great poet, Cheefpreest, wrote a delicate couplet on that once, which I will, with my own great poetic acumen, translate into your barbarous language."

Azazel cleared his throat, thought a moment, then said:

"All nature is but art unknown to thee,
All chance, direction which thou canst not see."

I asked suspiciously, "What does that mean?"

"It means that a law of nature is involved, and we must figure out what it is and how it might be taken advantage of to modify events to our liking. That's what it means. Do you think a great poet of my people would lie?"

"Well, can you do anything about it?"

"Possibly. There are a great many laws of nature, you know."

"Are there?"

"Oh, yes. There's quite a cute little law of nature—devilishly attractive equation when put into Weinbaumian tensors—that governs the heat of soup in relation to the hurry you are in to finish it. It's possible if this odd diminution of duration of Chairmanly term is governed by the law I think it is governed by, that I can so alter the nature of your friend's being as to insure him against damage from anything on Earth. He won't be immune to the processes of physiological decay, of course. The workings of what I have in mind won't make him immortal, but it will at least make certain he won't die of infection or of accident, which I imagine he would find satisfactory."

"Entirely so. But when will this come to pass?"

"I'm not completely sure. I'm rather busy these days with a young female of my species who seems uncannily smitten with me, poor soul." He yawned, his small, forked tongue curling into a helix and straightening again. "I seem to be short on sleep, but in two or three days it should be done."

"Yes, but how can I tell when and if all is well?"

"That's easy," said Azazel. "Just wait a few days and then shove your friend under a speeding truck. If he gets up unharmed, the modifications I have introduced will be working. —And now if you don't mind, I just want to play out this one hand and then I will think of my poor mid-mother and leave the game. With my winnings, of course."

Don't think I didn't have plenty of trouble persuading Vissarion that he was perfectly safe.

"Nothing on Earth can harm me?" he kept saying. "How do you know nothing on Earth can harm me?"

"I know. See here, Vissarion, I don't question your specialized knowledge. When you tell me that interest rates are going to fall, I don't quibble and ask you how you know."

"Well, that's all very well, but if I say interest rates are going to fall and then they proceed to rise—and they don't do that more than half the time—your feelings are merely hurt. If, however, I act on the assumption that nothing on Earth can hurt me, and then something on Earth hurts me, I am a lot more than hurt. I am *hurt*."

There's no arguing with logic, but I kept arguing anyway. I persuaded him, at least, to attempt no flat refusal of the post but to try to delay them for a few days.

"They'll never accept a delay," he said, but, out of nowhere, it turned out that that very day was the anniversary of Black Friday and the CDR went into the usual three-day period of mourning and prayers for the dead. The delay therefore came automatically and that alone rather shook Vissarion into thinking that perhaps he did lead a charmed life.

Then, at the end of the mourning period, when he ventured into public again, I was crossing a busy street with him and—I don't really remember how it happened—I suddenly bent to tie a shoelace and somehow I lost my balance and fell against him, and *he* lost his balance and fell into the line of traffic and suddenly there was a devil of a shrieking of brakes and skidding of tires and three cars were totaled.

Vissarion didn't come out of it entirely untouched. His hair was rather mussed, his eyeglasses were slightly askew, and there was a spot of oil on the right knee of his trousers.

He disregarded that, however. He said, in awe, as he gazed at the carnage, "They never touched me. My goodness, they never touched me."

And the very next day, he was caught in the rain without rubbers, umbrella, or raincoat—a nasty, cold rain—and did not catch cold on the spot. He called up, without even bothering to towel his hair, and accepted the post as Chairman.

He had a very nice tenure, I must say. He quintupled his fees at once without any of this nonsense of achieving a better batting average as far as his prognostications were concerned. After all, a client can't expect to have everything. If he gets unparalleled prestige in the professional man he consults, can be reasonably demand better advice, *also?*

Furthermore, he enjoyed life. No colds. Nothing communicable at all. He crossed streets with impunity, disregarding the lights when he was in a hurry, and yet only rarely caused accidents to others. He had no hesitation about entering the park at night, and once when a street hooligan placed a knife to his chest and suggested a transfer of funds, Vissarion simply kicked the young financier in the groin and walked on. The hooligan in question was so preoccupied with the kick that he entirely neglected to renew his application.

It was on the anniversary of his succession to the Chairmanship when I met him at the parkside. He was on his way to the testimonial luncheon for the occasion. It was a beautiful Indian summer day and, as we took our seats on the park bench, side by side, we felt completely happy and at ease.

"George," he said, "I have had a happy year."

"I'm delighted," I said.

"My reputation is higher than that of any economist who ever lived. Only last month, when I warned that Amalgamated Suds would have to merge with Consolidated Soap and they were forced to consolidate with Merged Soap, everyone marveled at how close I came."

"I remember," I said.

"And now, I want you to be the first to know—"

"Yes, Vissarion?"

"The President has asked me to be Chief Economist of the United States, and I have reached the pinnacle of all my dreams and desires. See here."

He held out to me an impressive envelope with "White House" embossed on the upper left. I opened it and, as I did so, I heard a strange sort of *zing-g-g,* as though a bullet had buzzed its way past my ear, and I caught a strange flash of light in the corner of my eye.

Vissarion was sprawled sideways on the bench, a splotch of blood on his shirt-front, clearly dead. Some passersby stopped in astonishment; others screamed or gasped and hurried on.

"Call a doctor!" I called out. "Call the police!"

They came eventually, and the verdict was that he had been shot, right through the heart, by a gun of uncertain calibre, fired by some psychopathic sniper. They never caught the sniper, or even found the bullet. Fortunately, there were witnesses willing to testify that I had been holding a letter in my hand at the time and was clearly innocent of any evil deed, or I might have had an uncomfortable time of it.

Poor Vissarion! He had been Chairman for exactly one year, as he himself had feared he would be, and yet it was not Azazel's fault. Azazel had said that Vissarion would not be killed by anything on Earth but, as Hamlet wisely said, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than there are in earth alone."

Before the doctors and police arrived, I had noted the small hole in the wood of that part of the bench that had been behind Vissarion. With my penknife, I picked out the small dark object embedded in it. It was still warm. Months later, I had it quietly looked at at the museum and I was right. It was a meteorite.

In short, then, Vissarion had been killed by nothing on Earth. He was the first person in history known to have been killed by a meteorite. I kept it absolutely quiet, of course, for Vissarion was a very private man and would have hated to achieve notoriety in this way. It would have drowned out all his great works of economics and I couldn't allow that.

But on every anniversary of his elevation and of his death—like today—I sit and think: Poor Vissarion! Poor Vissarion!

* * *

George mopped at his eyes with his handkerchief and I said, "And what happened to the next person to succeed to the Chairmanship? He must have held office for a half year, and then the next one for three months, and then the next—"

George said, "There is no need to flaunt your knowledge of higher mathematics at me, old fellow. I'm not one of your poor, suffering readers. None of that ever happened. The irony of it is that the club altered the law of nature on its own."

"Oh? And how did they do that?"

"It struck them that the name of the club, the CDR, the Club of Diminishing Returns, was an ill-omened name that controlled the length of tenure of the Chairman. They simply inverted the initials, therefore, and changed CDR to CRD."

"And what does CRD stand for?"

"The Club of Random Distribution, of course," said George, "and the next Chairman has now been in office for ten years and is still going strong."

And as the waiter returned with my change, George caught it in his handkerchief, put both handkerchief and bills into his breast pocket with a flourish, got up and, with a debonair wave of his hand, walked off. ●

NUMBERS OF THE BEAST

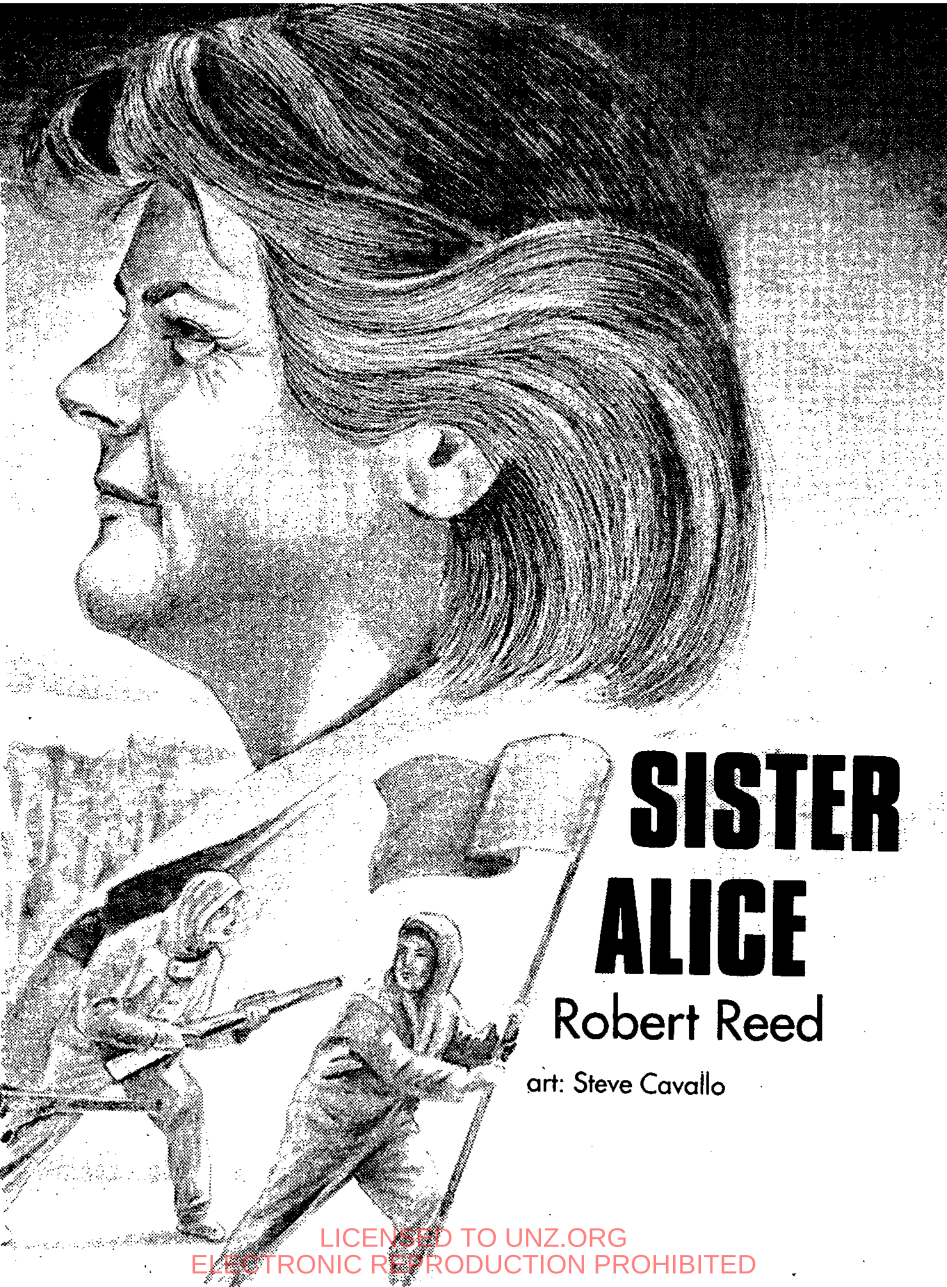
For Emily Dickinson and the Em Dash

A fractal pattern, Mandelbrot's—
a mapping of the complex kind—
expanded like a blooming Rose—
a flower of the Mind.

But even Beauty couldn't hide—
beyond the petals' filigrees—
the Hand that sprays Insecticide
on all of our Infinities.

—Keith Allen Daniels

Robert Reed, whose previous appearances in *Asimov's* include "The Toad of Heaven" (June 1993); "Blind" (May 1993); and his Hugo-award finalist "The Utility Man" (November 1990), returns to our pages with a blockbuster. Deep in the future of "Sister Alice," much of humanity has become unrecognizable. Though certain people now wield awesome powers, they must shoulder responsibilities almost too terrible to describe.



SISTER ALICE

Robert Reed

art: Steve Cavallo

1

"When I found myself daydreaming about my childhood, remembering the fun, thinking how carefree it had been . . . that's when my instincts began to warn me that our work had gone seriously, tragically wrong. . . ."

—Alice's testimony

Xo told their squad that it was a lousy place to build and that their fort was flawed, that the Blues would crush them and it was Ravleen's fault. Everything was Ravleen's fault. And of course she heard about his grousing and came over, interrupting their drills to tell Xo to quit it. And he laughed, saying, "You're no general." Ord heard him. Everyone heard him, and Ravleen had no choice but to knock him down and kick him. Xo was a Gold, and she was their Sanchex, the Gold's eternal general. She had to punish him, aiming for his belly and ribs. But Xo started cursing her. Bright poisonous words hung in the air. "You're no Sanchex," he grunted, "and I'm not scared." Then Ravleen moved to his face, breaking his nose and cheekbones, the skin splitting, blood splattering on the new snow. Everyone watched. Ord stood nearby, watching the snow melt into the blood, diluting it. He saw Xo's face become a gooey mess, and he heard the boy's voice finally fall away into a sloppy wet laugh.

Tule stepped up, saying, "If you keep hurting him, he won't be able to hurt anyone else."

Ravleen paused, panting from her hard work, and deciding Tule was right. She dropped her foot and pushed her long black hair out of her eyes, grinning now, making sure everyone saw her confidence. Then she knelt, touching the bloody snow while asking, "Who wants to help this shit home?"

Tule was closest, but she despised Xo. She didn't approve of causing trouble; she felt it was her duty to keep their clan working smoothly, bowing to Ravleen's demands.

On the other hand, Ord was sympathetic. Xo wasn't his best friend, but he was a reliable one. Besides, they were on the same squad for now. A soldier had a duty to his squad; and that's why Ord stepped up, saying, "I'll take him."

"Then come straight back," Ravleen added.

He gave a nod and asked Xo, "Can you stand up?"

The bloody face said, "Maybe." A gloved hand reached for him, and Ord thought of the boy's ribs as he lifted. But the tortured groans were too much; Xo had a tendency toward theater. "Thanks," he muttered, then he reached into his mouth, pulling out a slick white incisor and tossing it at the young fort. It struck one of the robots with a soft *ping*.

"Come on," Ord prompted.

They walked slowly, crossing the long pasture and climbing to the woods. Xo stopped at the first tree, leaning against it and spitting out a glob of dark blood. Ord worked to be patient. Looking back at the pasture, he watched the robots stripping it of snow, building the fort according to Ravleen's design. A metal pole stood in the future courtyard, topped with a limp golden flag. Figures in clean white snowsuits were drilling again, six squads honing themselves for snowfare. It looked like an easy pasture to defend. On three sides it fell away, cliffs and nearly vertical woods protecting it. The only easy approach was from here, from above. Ravleen was assuming that the Blues would do what was easy, which was why the nearest wall had the thickest foundation. "Keep your strong to their strong," was an old Sanchex motto. But what if Xo was right? What if she had left their other walls too weak?

"I can't walk fast," Xo warned him. His swollen face was inhuman, but the bleeding had stopped, scabs forming and the smallest cuts beginning to heal. Speaking with a faint lisp, Xo admitted, "I sound funny."

"You should have left your tooth in," Ord countered. Gums preferred to repair teeth, not replace them. "Or you might have kept your mouth shut in the first place."

Xo gave a little laugh.

Something moved in the distance. Ord squinted and realized it was just an airship, distant sunlight making it glitter; and now he said, "Let's go." He said, "I'm tired of standing still."

They walked on a narrow trail, not fast, snow starting to fall and the woods knee-deep in old snow. They weren't far from the lowlands, and sometimes, particularly on clear days, city sounds would rise up from that hot flat country. But not today. A kind of enforced silence hung in the air. To step and not hear any footfall made Ord nervous, in secret. He realized that he was alert, as if ready to be ambushed. The war wouldn't start until the day after tomorrow, but he was anticipating it. Or maybe it was the fight he had just seen, maybe.

"Know why I did it?" asked Xo.

Ord said nothing.

"Know why I pissed her off?"

"Why?"

The battered face grinned. "I don't have to do this war now."

"Ravleen's not that angry," Ord countered. "Not angry enough to ban you, at least."

"But I'm hurt. Look at me."

"So?" Ord refused to be impressed. Glancing over a shoulder, he observed, "You're walking and talking. That's not badly hurt."

Except Xo's Family, the Nuyens, were careful people. A sister might see him and order him to stay home for several days. It wouldn't be the first time, particularly if he moaned like he did now, telling Ord, "I don't want to play snowfare."

"Why not?"

Wincing, Xo pretended to ache. But by now a cocktail of anesthesias was working, and both of them knew it.

"If you can stand, you can fight," Ord reminded him. "When you became a Gold you pledged to serve—"

"Wait." The boy waded into the deep snow, heading for an outcropping of false granite. He found a block of bright pink stone, brought it back and dropped it at Ord's feet. "Do me a favor?"

"No."

"Not hard. Just nick me here." He touched his stubby black hair. "I'll owe you. Promise."

Ord lifted the stone without conviction.

"Make it ugly," the boy prompted.

Ord shook his head, saying, "First tell me why you don't want to fight. Is it Ravleen?"

"Not really."

"Tell me or I won't help."

The boy touched his dark round face with his white gloves. "Just because it's stupid."

"What's stupid?"

"This game. This whole snowfare business."

Calling it a "game" was taboo. Snowfare was meant to be taken very, very seriously.

"But we're too old to play," his friend persisted. "I know I am."

This wasn't about Ravleen, and Ord had no easy, clear rebuke. He asked, "What will you do instead?" He assumed there was some other diversion. Perhaps a trip somewhere. Not out of the mountains, of course. That wasn't permitted, not at their age. But maybe one of Xo's siblings wanted to take him on a hunt, or some other adventure.

But Xo said, "Nothing. I just want to stay home and study." A pause. "Clip me here, okay? I'll tell my sisters that Ravleen did it. Promise."

Ord watched the boy lay on the hard white trail, face up, waiting calmly for his skull to be cracked open. The stone couldn't hurt him too badly. Eons ago, human beings gave up soft brains for better ones built of tough, nearly immortal substances. The worst Ord could manage was to break up some neural connections, making Xo forgetful and clumsy for a few days. The body might die, but nothing more. Nothing less than a nuclear fire could kill them, and that was the same for almost every human.

"Are you going to help me?" the boy whined.

Ord watched the hopeful face, judging distance and mass, guessing what would make the ugliest wound. But he kept thinking back to the comment about being too old, knowing it was a little true. Some trusted spark of his had slipped away, and that bothered him.

"Ord?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you hurry up?"

He let the stone slip free of his grip, missing Xo by a hair's breadth; then he said, "No, I can't. I shouldn't."

Xo lifted the stone himself, groaning as he aimed, trying to summon

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the courage. He was invulnerable, but so were old instincts. This wasn't easy. His arms shook, then collapsed. The attempt looked like a half-accident—*thud*—and his head was dented on one side. But not badly enough, they discovered. Xo could stand by himself, only a little dizzy; and he touched his wounds one after another, telling himself, "At least I'll get tomorrow to myself." He wasn't looking at Ord, or anywhere, saying, "This is good enough," with a soft wet voice that was lost in the muting whisper of the snowfall.

2

> *"When I lived here, when I was a child, these mountains were new. The estates were new. Our mansions were modest but comfortable, the Families victorious . . . and the galaxy was vast and nearly empty, full of endless and intoxicating possibilities. . . ."*
>
> *—Alice's testimony*

There were exactly one thousand Families—a number set by design—and Ord was a Chamberlain, one of the more famous and powerful Families. The ancestral Chamberlain home stood near the center of their estate, on a broad scenic peak. It was a round building, tall and massive, built from false granite with a shell of tailored white coral. The interior, above ground and below, was a maze of rooms and curling hallways, simple laboratories and assorted social arenas. There were enough beds for fifteen hundred brothers and sisters, should so many ever wish to visit at one time. And there were other buildings scattered about the estate—cottages, hunting lodges, and baby mansions—capable of absorbing the rest of them.

But it was the round white house that was famous, recognized by virtually every educated entity in the galaxy. Chamberlains had helped the Sanchexes win the Great Wars, then they were instrumental in building the Ten Million Year Peace. Chamberlains had made first contact with many important alien species, had been first to reach the galaxy's core, and for eons had pioneered the rapid terraforming of empty worlds. With low, low death rates being common, there was a constant demand for new homes, aliens and humans both paying substantial fees for good work.

Ord had a shallow sense of this history. He knew the Great Wars were fought with savagery, billions of people murdered and the Earth itself left battered. But the Peace had endured for a hundred thousand centuries, the Families giving it backbone and the occasional guidance. Ord himself was a whisper of a child, not even fifty years old. His powers as a Chamberlain lay in the remote future. Imagining adulthood, he pictured a busy semi-godhood, building green worlds at the Core, or perhaps flying off to some far galaxy, exploring it while making new allies. But the actual changes were mysterious to him. His mind and energies would swell, but how would it feel to him? His senses would multiply, and time itself would slow to where seconds would become hours. But how would such an existence seem? He had asked the brothers and sisters living with him. He had worn them down with his inquiries. Yet not one of them had ever offered a clear, believable answer.

"You're too young to understand," they would assure him, their voices bored. Or even a little shrill. "Just wait and see," they would recommend. "You'll learn when you're ready." But Ord could sense that like him, they had no idea what the future held. Like all perfect questions, his were unoriginal. And all of the Chamberlains in the mansion—all younger than a millennium—were in that same proverbial spacecraft, adrift and lost and uniformly scared.

The Golds' fort was completed on schedule, by midafternoon that next day, and after some last work the clan walked up to the tube port together, singing Gold songs. From there it was a brief ride home for Ord. He was deposited at the lawn's edge, his pet bear-dogs charging him, yelping and begging to be scratched behind every ear. Done with that duty, Ord entered through the usual door, touching the motto engraved in the granite overhead. "PRIDE AND SACRIFICE," said the ageless letters; his gesture was a habit, almost a reflex. Then he ran to the nearest stairwell, riding up to his floor and sprinting to his room, greeted there by a pair of mothering robots at least as obnoxious as his bear-dogs. They asked about his day and his accomplishments. Was there enough snow? "Plenty," he allowed; it had fallen all night. Good for forts, was it? "Perfect," he told them, removing his warm snowsuit. "Good wet snow." Close to the lowlands, that pasture had a milder climate than this high country. "And I think it's a very strong fort. I think so. . . ."

The robots paused, saying nothing where they might have said, "We're glad to hear it."

Ord hesitated, suddenly alert.

"Lyman has just asked to see you," said synchronized voices.

Lyman was a brother, the oldest one living in the house. *He wants to see me?* Ord wondered what was wrong. If he'd hit Xo with that rock . . . but he hadn't, and nothing else remarkable had happened in the last few days. "What does Lyman want?"

"We're curious too," they replied, glass eyes winking. "You're supposed to go to his room as soon as you're clean and dressed."

Ord looked outside. His longest wall faced east, a crystal window in place of the granite. Somewhere below, in the gathering darkness, was his new fort. On clear nights he liked to watch the glow of the cities beyond, wondering about all the kinds of people living near these mountains. Everyone on Earth was rich to some degree; the land was too crowded and too expensive for those without means. But only the Families could afford having winters, putting their trees and lakes to sleep. These artificial mountains, constructed after the Great Wars, had never produced meaningful food, nor had they ever housed more than a very few people.

"Lyman sounds impatient," the robots warned him.

"Okay." Ord ran through his sonic bath, then dressed and left. His brother lived several stories above him. He had visited enough to know the way, and enough to hesitate at the door. Lyman liked to entertain various girlfriends; caution was required. Ord announced his presence, and the door opened, a distant voice telling him:

"Wait there. I'm almost done."

It was Ord's voice, only deeper. Older. Lyman had one of the large interior rooms, two universal-walls and a vast bed, plus a private swimming pool and sauna. Distinctive touches were meant to say *Lyman* but always felt more *Chamberlain* than anything. Chamberlains liked mementos. Where Ord would have kept his collection of alien fossils, his brother set up small light-statues of the girlfriends—women of every variation, uniformly disrobed—and they smiled at Ord, showing him how pleased they were to stand on those shelves. One universal-wall was activated. The live feed showed him moons orbiting a banded gas giant, each moon encased in an atmosphere, the nearest one blued by an ocean. Did a Chamberlain build that ocean? It wasn't too unlikely. Lyman was training to become an apprentice terraformer. Once he was declared an adult, probably in less than a century, he would leave for his first assignment. Something easy, no doubt. He would rebuild some fat comet between stars, probably for a client who wanted a vacation home—

"How's your war?" asked Lyman, striding out of the bath, adjusting his loose-fitting trousers as he moved. "Done with your fort?"

Ord muttered, "Yes."

"Any more fights?"

Was this about Xo and Ravleen? Or maybe Lyman was just making noise. Either way, Ord guessed that his brother knew the answers, that he had heard from the robots and the estate's sentries. "No fights," Ord reported. "Not until tomorrow morning, at least."

But Lyman wasn't listening. He started to speak, to make some joke, then paused, his mouth left open for a long moment.

Ord waited, tension building.

"Do you know where I was this morning?"

"Where?"

"Antarctica." Lyman liked to tease his little brother, reminding him that one of them could travel at will on the Earth. No farther, but it still seemed like an enormous freedom.

"What were you doing there?" asked Ord.

"Having fun, naturally." Lyman tried to smile, scratching his bare belly. Taller than Ord, he had old-fashioned adult proportions, his body hairy and strong with an appropriate unfancy penis dangling in his trousers. Red hair grew to his shoulders. Like Ord, he had the telltale Chamberlain face, sharp features and pale skin and pale blue eyes. Their sisters were feminized versions of them, with breasts and such; physical

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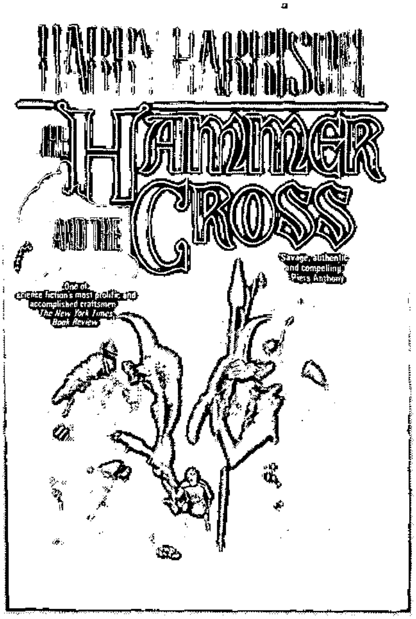
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forms were standardized, eternal, every Family built around its immortal norm, every norm patterned after its founder and ultimate parent.

Lyman sat next to his brother, sighed and asked, "Do you know why I came home? Have you heard?"

Ord shook his head, his breath quickening. What happened that would require Lyman to abandon his fun?

"Listen."

But then his brother said nothing else, his mouth left open and the eyes gazing at the wall. Finally Ord asked, "What is it?"

"In the next few days . . . soon, I don't know when . . . we'll have a guest with us. Be on your very best behavior, please."

"Who's visiting?"

Lyman seemed disturbed, or at least deeply puzzled, pursing his lips and shaking his head. "One of our sisters is dropping by."

Sisters came and went all of the time.

"An old sister," Lyman added.

Every sister was older than Ord.

And his brother grinned, as if realizing how mysterious this must sound. "A very old, much honored adult. She is."

Ord looked at the wall, watching its image change. A small dull sun was setting over a glassy sea. An ammonia sea, perhaps. He found himself dealing with this news by distancing himself, working on the dynamics of the other world as if it was one of his tutor's lessons.

"You're not listening," Lyman warned him.

"How old is she?"

"Her name is Alice."

Alice—

"She's our Twelve." The words were incredible to both of them. Lyman repeated himself, saying, "Yes. Twelve."

Ord was stunned, closing his hands into fists and dropping them into his lap. "Why is she coming here?"

Lyman didn't seem to hear him. "We received her private message this morning . . . coded . . . and everyone's excited, of course. . . ."

Ord nodded.

"A Twelve is coming here." Lyman was astonished, but the smile seemed almost joyless. "I looked up when the last Fifty or higher came to visit. Our Forty-two touched down for less than an hour, some twenty-eight millennia ago. A little handshake visit." He paused, rubbing at the stiff red hairs on his chest. "Alice wants to linger. She's requested the penthouse and given no departure time. Even though she'll be bored in a millisecond, she claims that she wants to live here."

This was landmark news, and Ord imagined telling the other Golds about it. Tonight? No, tomorrow. On the eve of combat. It would give him a sudden burst of importance, a worthiness. Even Ravleen would be impressed, and jealous, and he began to smile, imagining the moment.

"There's more," Lyman said, anticipating him. "The news is secret. Alice made it very clear—"

Secret?

"—and I'm giving you fair warning. You won't tell anyone. Not even your best friends. This is Chamberlain business, and it's private."

The boy offered a weak, confused nod.

"No other Family can know she's here."

"Why not?"

"Because that's what she wants."

"But why visit us?"

"Why not?" Lyman offered, then his face grew puzzled again. "I honestly don't know why. No one seems to know where she's been. But I'm sure that she'll explain, when it's time."

A Twelve. Ord knew there were just five Chamberlains older than Alice, the rest long dead. And of the five, two weren't even in the galaxy now, bound for Andromeda. By contrast, Ord had a five digit designation, as did Lyman and every other sibling in this house. He could never live long enough and become famous enough that his arrival here would be stunning news. "24,411 is on his way. Behave, children!" Ord nearly laughed at the preposterous image. If he lived a billion years—a possibility, in principle—and if he did wondrous things, then yes, he guessed that then he might generate the kind of excitement that he felt now. Maybe.

"I don't even know where she's been," Lyman repeated. "We've asked, but the walls won't tell us."

The famous Alice. She had been born after the Great Wars, in the first years of the Peace; and she was one of the first Chamberlains to master terraforming, most of her methods standard even today.

"Not a hint to anyone. All right, little brother?"

He said, "Yes," with a soft, disappointed breath.

Lyman made fists and placed them on his lap, saying, "I bet it's nothing important. Here and gone in ten minutes, she'll be."

The wall changed again, showing them a ringed gas giant. World-sized continents built of hyperfoams floated in its atmosphere, linked together, the winds carrying them along with a dancer's precision. Where was this place? Terraforming on that scale required time and much money, and there probably weren't a thousand worlds like it in the galaxy. A mere thousand, which was nothing. And he shut his eyes, knowing Alice had built it. Lyman had asked this wall to show him her work; and like his brother, Ord wondered why she would come here. Why bother? And why would such an enormous, wondrous soul want her presence kept secret? Why . . . ?

3

"Consider this. Our Families have never been wealthier, and they have never been so weak. Our fraction of humanity's worth has shriveled throughout the Peace, as planned. We are pledged to reproduce

slowly. We clone archaic bodies, then slowly fit them with the latest wonders. But while we've kept a monopoly on those wonders, other peoples and aliens and even the machine intelligences grow more numerous every day, accomplishing more and more with their insect tenacity . . . winning the Peace, in essence, which is of course why they agreed to it in the first place. . . ."

—Alice's testimony

Their fort was beautiful, tall and milk-colored, draped with last night's snow. Yesterday, done with drills, everyone but Xo had added some touch of his or her own. Handmade flourishes. On the parapets were snow fists and boat prows and big-eyed skulls. Ord had built a gargoyle on his portion of the wall—a fierce thing with wings extended, curved white teeth glowing in the early light—and he was standing behind it, on the broad rampart, his squad flanking him and everyone at attention. Ravleen was speaking, her voice coming from headphones sewn into their golden facemasks. "From now on," she promised, "these Blues are going to suffer every flavor of misery. We'll beat them once and for all."

It was a famous quote, the "every flavor of misery" line. One of the Sanchex generals had uttered it, and Ravleen repeated it once or twice every year. She and Tule were below, sitting inside the thick-walled keep at the back of the courtyard, watching the countryside with sensors and hidden cameras. Ord knew how much she wanted to win. This war's losers would make medals for the winners—the standard rule—and nobody would treasure her disk of iridium and diamond more than Ravleen. Sanchexes drank in their awards; every certificate of merit was on display, sometimes for centuries. The Ten Million Year Peace had only tempered them, it was said. And when the time came—when they were too mature for these wars—nobody would miss them more than Ravleen. Ord almost felt sorry for her, shutting his eyes . . . and his mind shifting back to the topic that had kept him sleepless all night. . . .

"What are you thinking?" asked Xo, strolling up to him. Save for some yellow bruises, his face had healed. He had showed it to Ord before putting on the mask, proud that he had healed so easily. "You look like you're thinking hard. What about?"

That his sister was coming. *Alice. My Twelve.* The words surfaced in his consciousness, begging to be spoken. Yet he had promised not to tell, not Xo or even his best friends. Maybe that was wise, he thought. Why would Alice come here? And wouldn't he look foolish when it turned out to be untrue?

"I wish we'd start," Xo groused, forgetting his question. "Waiting is boring."

Last night, following dinner with a dozen brothers and sisters, Ord had gone to his room and requested a biography of their great sister. He had read and watched holos until after midnight, trying to absorb some fraction of her enormous life. It was impossible. The history of the Earth seemed easy by comparison.

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"I'm bored," Xo repeated.

And as if she heard him, Ravleen interrupted the quiet. "Enemies in the woods, on the west. On the move."

Three squads were stationed on the strong west wall, including theirs. Saying nothing, they watched the leafless black trees for any motion, a delicious sense of drama in the wind.

"Mortars," warned Ravleen. "Firing."

Whump-whump. The Blues had two mortars, air-driven, their size and power set by old rules. Everyone dropped to their knees, hugging the parapet, and a pair of snowballs hit in the courtyard, bucket-sized and nobody injured. They were meant to judge range. The next rounds did the damage, someone crying out, "Heat," as a blue sphere struck behind Xo. Chemical goo broke free of its envelope, activated by the air and melting the ice beneath it. A thick blue cancer was spreading. Ord and Xo jumped up, using shovels to fling the worst of the goo below, then using last night's snow to make fast, sloppy patches.

It was fun, fast and fun, and everyone seemed to enjoy themselves.

"Return fire," Ravleen ordered.

Their own mortars were loaded, aligned by hand and guesswork. Whump, whump. Whump, whump. They fired snow only, harassing the enemy. And now a half a dozen Golds shouted, "Look!" as the Blues broke from the woods above.

"Guns at the ready," said their general.

Ord had an old snowgun—a favorite—with its plastic stock worn slick and pale, carried by two sisters before him. It had over-and-under barrels and a simple laser sight, a potent compressor and twenty rounds of snow loaded into the stock. Slugs were made inside the barrels, in an instant, each one thumb-sized and spinning for accuracy, able to hit someone's head at nearly forty meters.

"Ready," Ravleen whispered in Ord's ears.

He looked over the gargoyle's right wing, snow-colored figures with deep-blue facemasks charging across fresh snow, a practiced scream growing louder as they closed the gap . . . two dozen of them, including the eight who were rolling cannons into position . . . and where were the others . . . ?

"On my command," Ravleen said. "Cannons . . . fire!"

Thunk-thunk-thunk. Three cannons were on the west wall, a fourth held in reserve. Big fat rounds followed golden laser beams, no one struck. The Blues were zigzagging, a thin line of them coming. Fifty meters, then forty. Then thirty, and Ravleen said, "At will. Fire."

They rose together, as drilled, aiming and squeezing off double-shots. Flecks of laser light danced over their targets. It sounded like the popping of insects, the air filled with white streaks flying both ways. Ord picked a target and hit it in the belly, then the face, then missed when it ducked and slipped sideways. But he anticipated the next move, leading and firing and the double-shots smacking the face more than once, snapping it back, leaving the Blue stunned in the snow.

"Reload," said his gun. He dropped and opened the stock, shoving in handfuls of fresh wet ammunition. Then the lone squad on the east wall was shouting, and firing. Not only were there two attacks, but Ravleen hadn't seen the other troops marshaling. "Squad A," she shouted, "change walls. Support the east. Now."

The Blues must have disabled the watchdogs on the east. With a fair trick? Every war had its strict rules, only so much snow for a fort, so much heat allowed its attackers, and so on. Squad B—Ord's—had to spread out and cover for A. He would fire and drop, then come up somewhere else. A lucky shot caught him above the eye, a warm thread of blood making it blink and water. He ducked and wiped with a sleeve, then moved and rose again. But now the Blues were in retreat, their attack meant to harass and nothing more. Their artillery fired overhead, peppering the east wall, heat gnawing at the hard white ice.

Ravleen pulled Squad C next. She had no choice. They had to repair holes while B was left alone on the west wall, six soldiers fighting more than a dozen. And of course the Blues attacked again, in a tight formation. Squad B closed ranks and fired down on them. Heat grenades ruined the snow gargoyle, its wings and snarling head collapsing into mush; and the Blues teased them, shouting, "You're next, you're next, you're next."

Ord dropped and reloaded, moved and rose. And the Blues guessed where he would be, and when, every gun fixed on him, blue sparkles half-blinding him and the double-shots on their way. He didn't have time to react. The entire salvo caught his face and throat; and what startled everyone was how he stayed on his feet, bloodied and stunned but undeniably upright.

The Blues fired again, in unison.

That second salvo lifted him off the rampart, snapping his head back, and he fell into the courtyard, landing on his back in the greasy blue heat, bruised and sore and suddenly tired enough to sleep, unable to see for all the blood in his eyes.

4

"Why did we attempt it? The simple, one-word explanation is greed. *The two-word explanation adds* charity, *because it was for your good as well as ours. The third word is* arrogance, *of course. And the fourth, without doubt, is* stupidity. . . ."

—*Alice's testimony*

Ord remembered when his blood tasted salty. Now it was sweet, reminding him of oranges. His biochemistry was changing, new genes awakened, his body progressively tougher and faster and faster to heal. He had been able to fight again by afternoon, and by dusk he felt almost normal, picking at the hard scabs as he entered the house. As always, he touched the PRIDE AND SACRIFICE emblem on his way to the stairs. But something made him pause, something subtle, Ord standing on the balls of his feet while listening, a peculiar nonsound emerging from another hallway.

He changed direction, suddenly aware of his heartbeat.

The house had been built in stages, layered like a coral reef, the oldest regions in the deep interior. The original mansion had been abandoned—a five-story structure not particularly grand in its day—and Ord knew he had reached it when the floor changed to natural stone, cold and dirty white. Lights woke for him, and the general appearance had been maintained by the house robots; yet everything felt old, even tired, Ord touching the simple brick walls, new mortars mending the old but nothing else changed, thousands of centuries focused squarely on him, barely allowing him to breathe.

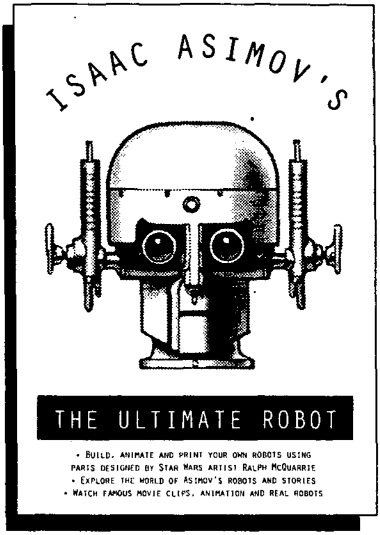
There was a central staircase leading up to various sealed doorways. Every Gold had come here with him, at least once, Ord showing off the Chamberlains' humble beginnings. Beside the staircase were two heavy doors, also sealed, one on each side. Not even Lyman had permission or the means to open them. But today, for no apparent reason, the door on his left was ajar. No, it was removed. He stepped closer, blinked, and saw the bare hinges and dark air . . . and nothing. It was as if the great old door had been stolen, or erased, and he couldn't guess why.

Ord paused, squinting now. The room beyond was dim and imprecise, dust floating with graceful ease. He heard a sound, a faint dry click, but couldn't guess its direction. "Hello?" His voice was weak, almost useless. The room seemed to swallow his noise, then him, his snowboots falling silent on the old rotted carpet and his face caressed by a sudden chill. He was inside before he made any conscious decision to take this chance, and he told himself: *I shouldn't be here.* He thought: *I will leave. Now.* But the promise seemed as good as the deed, and Ord walked on in a straight certain line.

It wasn't a large room, even in its day. A rounded wall was on his left, the tighter curve of the staircase on his right, and every wall was buried behind cabinets and framed paintings and various decorations that made no sense to him, styles and logic long extinct. The place felt like a storage closet, not a room where people would gather. Despite careful treatment, the relics were degrading, wood splitting along lines of weakness, paintings faded and flaking. He paused and stared at the largest painting, a faint yellow lamp glowing above it. The plaque beneath told Ord what he suspected, the subject's name etched into a greenish metal.

"Yes, he's our father."

The voice didn't startle him. It came wrapped in a calmness that soothed and nourished him. Removing one thin glove, Ord touched the name, *Ian Chamberlain* written in the dead man's neat, circumspect script. It was similar to Ord's handwriting . . . the same angles, the same spacings . . . and he felt a sudden deep reverence for the man, Ian shown posing before the original mansion, every feature blurred by the tired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paints. Ord had seen Ian countless times, in holos and interactive fictions; but here, in these circumstances, he felt close to the man, and nervous, his mouth going small and dry. This was their father, their One; and the voice was saying, "Look at me," with a mild, flat tone that couldn't startle anyone.

It was his sister's voice—every sister's voice—yet it was all wrong, reaching deeper than simple sound could manage.

"I'm right behind you," he heard, and he turned, discovering a figure standing in the room's center, smiling at him, her face the same as any sister's face, only rounder. She wore a body that was a little fat, wrinkles crowded around the eyes and a softness to the flesh, pudgy hands trying to straighten a wrinkle in her simple dark blouse. She took a step toward him, and Ord felt a tingling sensation, smelling ozone. Become a certain age, he knew, and you ceased to be merely tough meat and an enduring mind. Succeed at being an adult for a few tens of thousands of years, and your Family taught you how to use new energies, plasmas and shadow matter. Eventually you were built of things more unseen than seen, the prosaic nonsense of sweet blood and neurons left for special occasions.

"Look at you," she whispered, a dry hand touching Ord on the cheek. "Do you know how perfectly perfect you look?"

"You're the Twelve," he sputtered.

She gave an odd little laugh.

Ord managed a clumsy sideways step, wondering if she could be someone else. It seemed preposterous to think that a Twelve could speak to him. Was she some younger sister, some assistant perhaps?

"My name is Alice," she warned, "not Twelve. And you? You must be the baby. Ord."

He offered a very slight nod.

Curiosity and a mild empathy showed on the smiling face. Alice touched him again, on the other cheek, saying, "There. All gone."

His scabs had dissolved, bruises absorbed.

She laughed without making noise, tilting her head as if to look at him from a new vantage point. Invisible hands passed through his flesh, studying him from within; then she was saying, "I used to enjoy a good snowball fight. Isn't that remarkable to think?"

It seemed unlikely, yes.

"Quite the fort you have." She closed her eyes, a wisp of red hair dangling over her chalky forehead. "Not elaborate, no. But sturdy. A good solid construction."

He asked, "Can you see it now?"

"Easily." She opened her eyes, smiling as she said, "You fought on the west wall, near the middle—"

"How can you—?"

"Bootprints. Blood. A thousand ways." Then she said, "This is yours," and held up his snowgun. Surprise slipped into nervousness. They weren't supposed to remove equipment from the battlefield. He watched while Alice went through the motions of a careful examination, placing her right eye to the end of the barrel and tugging on the trigger. Ord grimaced. But nothing happened, and she seemed amused by his response, smiling at him, her soft voice saying, "My, my. I didn't have such fancy toys when I was a girl."

It wasn't fancy, but he didn't correct her.

She assured him, "I am jealous."

He thought that was a remarkable thing to hear. A Twelve envying him? Because of a toy gun?

"How are my Radiant Golds doing?"

Radiant?

"What kind of wargame is it?"

"A forty hour scenario," he reported. "Heavy snows and the Golds defend a place of their choice—"

"Against the Electric Blues," she interjected.

Ord paused and swallowed, then said, "They have to capture our flag."

Something about Alice made him feel happy, as if she couldn't contain her own joy and it flowed into him, sweetening his mood. She shut her eyes again, savoring the instant. "Here." She handed him his weapon. "I don't mean to leave you defenseless."

"I can't have it . . . here . . ."

"Pardon me?"

Ord swallowed, then used a careful, certain voice. "I leave my gun wherever I was standing. Where I was when we quit."

"Marking your position. How reasonable."

It vanished from his grip, fingertips tingling for an instant.

"I am sorry. I didn't know." Yet she sounded more amused than sorry. Turning, she did a slow stately walk around the room, absorbing everything with eyes and perhaps other senses. Fancy china plates were collapsing into dust. An ornamental knife was speckled with corrosion. A crystal sphere had broken in two—that seemed to amuse her—and she picked up the larger part, saying, "In my day, we threw snowballs. We made them with our hands and threw them, and I wasn't particularly good at it. The sexes differed too much in ability, and I had a girl's arm." She set the crystal down again, turned and stared at the ceiling for a long time. "That pasture you're defending? I fought for it once. I can recall . . . I was sore afterward, of course." She paused, then looked at him again. "Do the Swords still exist?"

"The Silvers," Ord replied. There were twenty clans, twenty colors, fifty children in each one. He had to ask, "Were you a Gold?"

"One of the first, and worst."

Ord imagined this woman running in the snow, attacking a cowering line of Silvers. In the early Peace, childhoods were quick and old-fashioned. A person became an adult in just a century, and only then was her body improved, her mind made ready to deal with Family responsibilities. Slow growth, like Ord's, allowed for quality. For better maturity. He had been told that many times, and believed it; yet part of him envied Alice, thinking how she had been a child for just a very few winters.

"And who's your general?"

"Ravleen."

"She has to be a Sanchex, am I right?"

Ord nodded.

"Crystal can grow tired and shatter," she said, "but some things are too resilient. If you see my point." Alice gave a satisfied nod, then told him, "I would like to hear about everything. Soon. It's been too long since I last visited . . . and enjoyed this lovely old house. . . ."

Her voice fell away, as if she was hunting for the best word.

Then she said, "Enjoyed," once again.

"Why are you here?" Ord heard himself asking. "Alice?"

She didn't seem to hear him, stepping past him, hands lifting to touch the old portrait. With means obscure and powerful, she rearranged the molecules in the tired paints, recreating their father's face and body, then altering the artist's original work. A rope of glass fibers dangled from the dead man's chest. Through them he would have controlled a multitude of powerful primitive machines, his body connected to whatever warship or world he was residing on at the moment. Few humans used such systems anymore. No Family member bothered with them. But Ord recalled that exposing that rope, whether in public or a portrait, would have been rude, even vile. After the Wars, and for a very long time, it was important for Chamberlains and every other Family to hide their augmented selves.

"What do you think, little brother?"

He stepped close and studied the portrait. The round white house and green lawn had been left unchanged, as if out of focus. They made Ian all the more real, set against that exhausted background. Ord stared at the face—ageless and wise; the seminal patriarch—and he saw a quality in its expression. It was as if the artist had told the great man to smile, and he had obeyed, but there was some powerful, deep-felt sadness in him that he could never hide.

Ord was uneasy. What Alice had done wasn't restoration, it was vandalism. The past always should be respected; yet here she had altered a work of art, making it something else entirely. Self-righteousness left him bold, and he asked again, "Why are you here?"

Alice seemed composed, giving him a watery grin while asking in turn, "Why can't I come here?" Then she looked at their father, a thin colorless voice saying, "When she wants, a person should be able to come home."

He had no simple, quick response.

"Desire," she said, "is reason enough, little brother."

And when he next glanced at the portrait, she vanished. He found himself alone, standing in a room where he didn't belong, the air suddenly frigid and his blood-caked snowsuit warming itself and him in response, his breath visible, like thin puffs of tepid steam.

Ord went to his room, telling no one what had happened. Tonight the house felt exceptionally empty. He assumed the others were with Alice,

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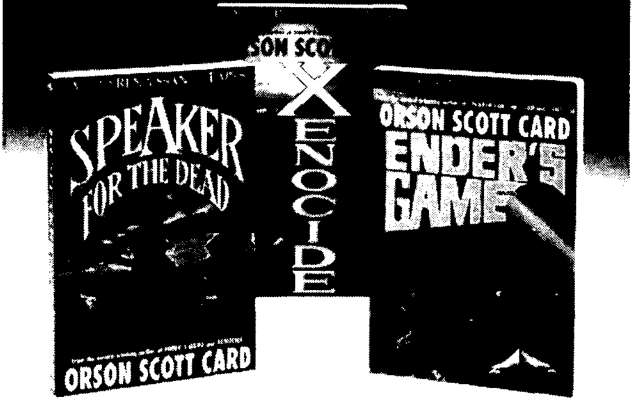

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greeting her in some fashion, and that there were good reasons why the youngest brother wouldn't be included. Eating alone, he studied the day's lessons without concentrating. Poetry and mathematics seemed unreal, and he eventually put them aside, ordering his universal-wall to show him more of Alice's worlds. Light-velocity feeds were found; a new vista was presented every few minutes. Ord put on pajamas and sat on his bed, fresh snow falling behind him, illuminated by images from around the galaxy and nothing else visible in the black night.

Her worlds were rich with life. More than most terraformed worlds, easily. Sometimes Ord asked to see who lived on them, and he was shown city scenes and up-to-the-second census figures. Like him, these people were built from ordinary matter. Like him, they had limited talents but no programmed lifespans. Barring accidents, they might live forever. Yet unlike Ord—unlike anyone in the Family—they could manipulate their human forms. Instead of enlarging themselves with trickery, they bent themselves with genetic tailoring, adapting to odd niches or simply embellishing some feature for private reasons. It was a basic feature of the Peace; freedoms were granted along different tangents. A multitude of strange, even alien humans wandered past Ord: tall figures and tiny ones, people with golden fur and others with elephant noses. On the oldest, most crowded planets, it was best to divide into a carefully structured mass of species. The Earth itself had some hundred-thousand distinct, registered types of humans, every sort of food able to be metabolized by someone. Lyman had a passion for the strangest local ladies, Ord recalled. He would bring them to the mansion now and again; and once, completely by accident, Ord had walked in on him and his current girlfriend, at the very worst moment. An embarrassing, instructive lesson, it still made the boy blush twenty years later, thinking of that finned beauty in the swimming pool, on her back, and his brother gasping as he turned, discovering that he wasn't alone.

The Peace was built on rules. The Families had to begin with old-style bodies, and no profession belonged only to them. Yet they remained the best terraformers, commanding the best salaries. Teams of ordinary humans and machines couldn't build with the beauty that Alice achieved, he felt certain. And what's more, she worked for aliens too. Methane seas; nitrogen seas; water seas made toxic by bizarre biologies. Ord knew enough to admit that he knew very little. The next time he saw Alice, he would compliment her regardless. *If I see her,* he thought; and now he asked the wall to stop, lying back in bed, letting the sheets find him.

But he didn't sleep, his eyes barely closed when he heard a brother ask, "Did you tell? Anyone?"

Ord sat up, finding Lyman in the open door. Long hair and the broad shoulders were set against the lights of the hallway. "Tell anyone what?"

"About our sister coming," Lyman muttered, obviously nervous.

Ord shook his head. "I didn't, no. No one."

"Just thought I should check." He stepped closer, grinning and staring out the window.

"Does she like the penthouse?"

Lyman blinked and said, "She's not here yet, but she won't. I'm sure she won't."

The boy felt something. A caress, perhaps. Or maybe it was his own adrenaline, fatigue dispelled in an instant, his mouth dropping open but his voice gone.

Lyman noticed the odd expression, blinked and stepped backward.

Then Ord whispered, "I saw her."

"Where?"

Ord closed his mouth, summoning courage.

"Where did you see her?" Lyman came to the foot of the bed, then suggested, "It might have been someone else."

"She said she was Alice." And he told the story, describing the missing door and the room filled with relics, and Alice, and how she had easily done some odd things. Would he get into trouble for entering that room? Or for not telling Lyman about it afterward? "I thought you'd know that she's here," Ord assured him. Then he asked, "Why hasn't she told you that she's here?"

His brother leaned against the bed, his mouth open and his eyes empty. Around them was a ghostly sense of amusement, thick enough to taste, and sweet.

"Where is she, Lyman?"

The older brother merely shook his head, not saying the obvious. *She's here now . . . with us now. . . .*

5

"I have rebuilt some ninety-thousand major worlds for a wide assortment of clients. But my best work, without question, are the secret worlds that I build for myself, from nothing. I have done several dozen of them, inventing unique biologies and hiding them away inside dust clouds and in globular clusters. And yes, I know. They are questionable legal acts, I know. But many terraformers dabble in such work, and not just Family members either. And it's not an original idea that our dear Earth is someone's garden, built and lost, and all of us are merely its lucky sons and daughters. . . ."

—Alice's testimony

The skies were clear in the morning. The Sanchex mansion—a great gray pyramid—was visible in the north. Ord was eating his breakfast, half-dressed for battle, when Lyman returned to his room, telling him, "Someone is inside the penthouse. We're sure now."

Ord turned, saying nothing.

"But she won't respond. Yet." Lyman shook his head. "Just the same, we should keep her presence secret. Understood?"

Of course. But he went through the ritual of promising once again.

"Do normal activities," his brother insisted. "Act as if everything is perfectly normal."

Ord thought of his siblings at the penthouse door, asking it if Alice were inside. And Lyman, trying to hide his nervousness, merely nodded to himself and said, "Isn't it . . . a lovely day. . . ?"

The enemy was entrenched east and west of the fort, their main force clinging to a cliff face, using ropes and small wooden platforms. The Golds knew because Ravleen had cheated, sending out an automated probe during the night. Scans had proved that the Blues hadn't broken any major rules, using accepted methods to blind them, nothing but hard work responsible for their success. It was frustrating for Ravleen, her foes near enough to touch and out of reach. Hugging the cliff, they couldn't be bombarded. They could gather themselves, then rise en masse, flinging heat grenades and taking a few good shots but escaping before they were truly hurt.

Ravleen and Tule abandoned the keep. They strode along the ramparts, giving orders with sharp, worried voices. "You two," said Ravleen, meaning Xo and Ord. "Take that cannon and harass theirs." The Blues had continued firing from the high ground, aiming for the east wall. "And don't look at me like that," Ravleen snapped.

"Like what?" Xo countered.

She glared at him, breathing loudly.

"Go away," Xo whined. "We'll hit them, don't worry."

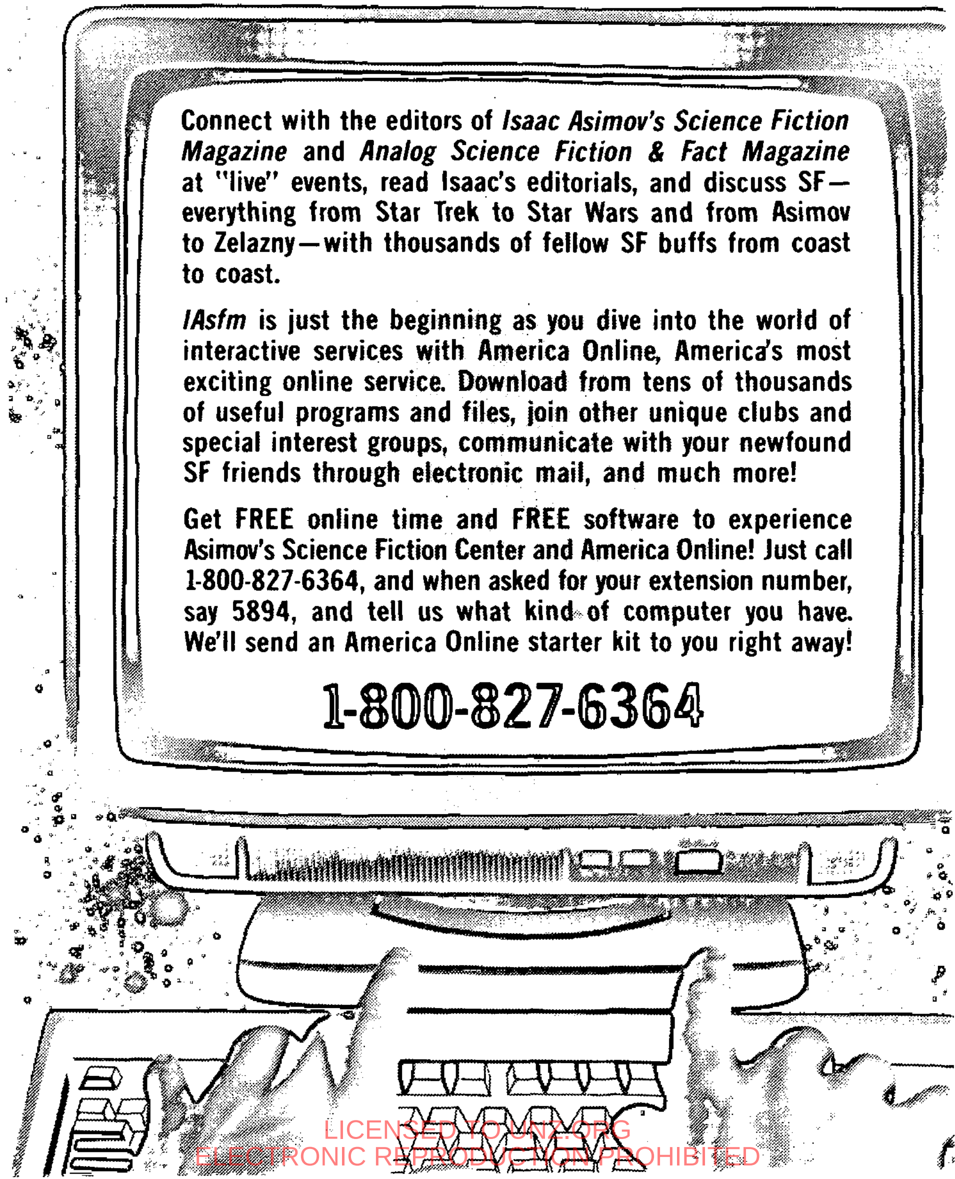
Except Xo didn't work with conviction. Ord found himself loading the breech every time. And he had to aim the long plastic barrel. Xo was content to fire the cannon, and when they missed—normal enough at this range, aiming uphill—Xo would shake his head and say, "Lower." Or he'd state something else obvious. Ord tried to ignore him, knowing how Xo could be full of himself and how anger was useless. Then Xo declared, "I'm tired of winter. I hate this snow."

But winter had just begun, thought Ord. And this time he pulled on the wire cord, a dull strong *whap* causing a white streak that landed short of its target, the Blues waving happily from behind their cannon.

"Too bad." Xo's mask showed only his eyes and mouth, all of them grinning. "Aim higher, why don't you?"

Better to cut the snow, Ord decided. He counted his handfuls, trying to find what was perfect. The next shot was nearer, and Xo, who hadn't been paying attention, said, "See? Better this time."

It was a brilliant day, and lovely. In quiet moments they could hear the city on the lowlands—horns and bells and a suggestive gray murmur—and Ord remembered the times he crept down to the estate's boundary, hiding in the grass, watching the ordinary people. His universal-wall could give closer, more intimate views of them; but sitting on



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the edge of that other world, knowing he could, if he wished, walk straight into it . . . well, that was intoxicating. Chimes rang in the distance, very softly, and Ord wished he didn't have to be here, realizing it had been several months since his last surreptitious visit.

The sunshine felt hot, and he broke a big rule in a small way. Rolling up his facemask, Ord massaged the wet skin with wet snow. Xo saw him and asked, "What happened to your wounds?"

Ord pulled the mask back into place.

"It looks like you weren't even hit yesterday."

"I slept a lot." Ord couldn't invent a better excuse.

"Sleep did that?"

No, Alice did it . . . and suddenly he was thinking about her. He had been pushing her aside all day, with some success; but suddenly he found himself wondering what she was doing, and did she like the penthouse, and would he see her again? "I wasn't hit that badly," he offered, hoping to deflect suspicions.

But Xo didn't care. His mind had shifted again, his voice too loud when he said, "Oh, she's a good general in the open. But not with this stand-and-fight shit. Everyone knows that."

Teasing Ravleen was the better game. More dangerous too.

"If I were her," Xo claimed, "I'd send out a couple squads. I'd assault their cannons now—"

"—and lose the squads with the counterattack," Ord responded.

"We'll lose if we don't," the boy maintained.

Ord ignored him, aiming again, trying to concentrate. The icy slug had an imprecise size and density, plus an imperfectly smooth surface. The universe, said his tutor, was a series of simple suppositions and principles meshing together in chaotic ways. There were specific mathematics to help navigate through the chaos, to a degree. He barely understood them . . . yet he had a sudden premonition, numbers and symbols converging into an answer and his hands lifting, the right hand grasping the cord and hesitating . . . wait, wait . . . *now.*

He tugged the cord with a careful, perfect strength.

The slug was in flight, traveling on a neat arc, and one of the Blues fired at the perfect moment, half an instant too late.

Ord's slug hit the barrel's mouth, plugging it; hot compressed air caused the breech to shatter, some old flaw exposed, steel-colored plastic shards driven backward into a boy's arm and face. He collapsed. A cheer rose from the rest of Squad B. Even Xo was impressed enough to say, "I can't believe it." People took breaks from the fight to run over and look, watching the unconscious body and the ruined gun being taken away. It was a sterling moment, and ugly, one less Blue to fight now. Ord tried to be thrilled but instead felt sorry, even though the boy would be well in a few days. No lasting harm was done, but that didn't seem to matter.

"You got lucky," said his morose companion.

No, it wasn't luck. Ord felt certain of it.

* * *

And one shot wasn't the war.

The east wall was hammered the rest of the day. It was blue and rotting when it was time to quit, and they had fifteen minutes to make repairs, in peace. But time was wasted, someone telling Ravleen what Xo had been saying about her and her approaching him, telling him, "How would you like to be banished? Is that what you want?"

"If you were any kind of general," Xo countered, "I'd fight and keep quiet."

Ravleen wasn't wearing her mask. Ord saw the outrage in her face, her features ugly and hard; and he intended to step between them, trying to defuse things. But the best he could offer was, "We should work—"

"Quiet," Ravleen warned him.

Then Xo said, "A real Sanchex would have won the war by now—"

—and Ravleen swung at him.

Ord tried to push her backward.

Then she swung at Ord, catching him on the temple, but somehow he stayed on his feet. He shook his head, the world blurring for an instant; and Ravleen was past him, pinning Xo against the blue wall, punching him in a blind rage . . . and Ord grabbed a forearm, giving it a quick little twist.

The tough bone failed, making a sharp *crack* when it shattered.

Ravleen collapsed to the ground, her arm useless and her shoulder dislocated. With a tight slow furious voice, she said, "Wait." She only looked at Ord, saying, "Banishment is too good for you. You wait. You'll see. . . ."

6

"While I'm here, I suppose I should plead guilty to any other little crimes that come to mind. I stole toys in my youth, for instance. And I built illegal worlds, as stated. And several times, to help friends, I have used improper means to alter elections and overthrow a few ugly governments that nobody misses. . . ."

—Alice's testimony

"You found my message, did you?"

"Yes." It was on his desk, handwritten on paper . . . or at least it had looked handwritten. "I came as soon as I could."

"Alice."

"Pardon?"

"Call me by my name, Ord. Please."

He whispered, "Alice," to himself.

"Have you ever seen this place?" She stepped back from the crystal door, beckoning to him. "I mean the penthouse, of course. I decorated it today. What do you think?"

The penthouse was an enormous room with no apparent walls or ceiling. Ord had been here for special dinners, but the comfortable furniture had been replaced with foliage, gray-green and thin. Meant for a low gravity environment, he realized; and he stepped, finding himself noticeably lighter. How did she manage it? Only expensive machines could dilute the Earth's pull, and he was very much impressed with his sister's skill.

"A quiet lad, isn't he?"

Ord said, "Sorry."

"Why? You had the busy day. You're entitled to your silence."

He looked at the blue-white sky, asking, "What world is this?"

"A secret world."

He didn't understand. But before he could ask questions, Alice asked him, "Are the others jealous? That only you received an invitation?"

Ord nodded. He had shown the note to Lyman—feeling that was proper—and Lyman had inquired, "What did you say to her?" In other words: *What makes you special?*

"You know, our siblings keep coming up here." Alice smiled at the floor. Tonight she looked thinner, wearing a flowing gown, emerald-green and soothing. Showing him her smile, she said, "They've stopped asking me to open the door. But they come and stare at it just the same. They must be rather curious."

Lyman had looked tired and frazzled.

"And rather pissed off, I think."

The words were unexpected, almost as incredible as this little forest of alien greenery. That a Twelve would say *pissed off* seemed contrary to some law or principle. Straightening his back, Ord said, "I think they're scared. I think."

"Well," said Alice, "isn't that their right?"

It was a strange reply, but he managed to shrug and nod.

She touched his face, telling him, "You look well. You must have moved at the right times."

He dipped his head. "How much did you watch?

"Every moment," she said happily.

"You . . . you did stuff. . . ."

"Twice, and you're welcome." Alice played with her own hair. It was longer than last night, fuller and brighter. "With your aim, once, and with the Sanchex girl."

"Now she hates me."

"Yet she will heal, won't she?"

What could he say?

"Twenty centuries from now," Alice offered, "she won't think of what you did. Tragedy is perishable, little brother. Believe me, she'll reach a point where the memories will elicit a smirk and little else."

What mattered was tomorrow, he knew, not the remote future. A part of Ord wished Alice hadn't come here, or at least had ignored him. At

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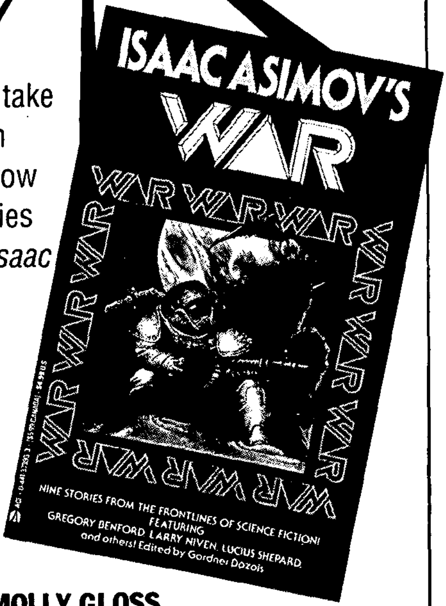
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ACE

this moment, Ravleen was sitting in her room, dreaming up a thousand suitable revenges. She was an impossible, brutal tyrant—

"—and yet," his sister interjected, "she might grow into a courageous leader, a glorious success, vital to every Family and to humanity."

"Can you read my thoughts?" he wondered aloud.

"In limited ways. But then again, anyone can read anyone's thoughts in limited ways." She offered a long laugh, then said, "I feel good about Ravleen. I think she'll become a special Sanchex. One of their dynamos. She has that essential spark."

"Does she?"

"Not that I can't be wrong." Alice shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps she'll even disappoint me."

Sanchexes loved dangerous work. Lacking wars, they busied themselves by wrestling with stars, delaying novas in those close to populated worlds, and sometimes exploding healthy isolated suns, using the titanic energies to create rare and expensive materials.

Alice said, "Isn't it odd? We begin as perfect copies of our parent, yet tiny, unforeseen factors have their way with us. For good or not." A pause, then she added, "Your friend Xo isn't much of a Nuyen. Which is a double insult, believe me."

Nuyens were talented governors and administrators. The Earth had many of them in high posts, serving as links between Families and the multitudes.

"I don't like Xo," Alice insisted. "I've met him a thousand times, and I've never trusted him."

Ord blinked, then asked, "What about me?"

"What about you?"

"What kind of Chamberlain will I make?"

"I learned ages ago, never predict what Chamberlains might do." The smile seemed fragile. "Now come over here and sit. Rest, little brother." She put an arm around him, saying, "I invited you to dinner, so let's eat and enjoy ourselves. What do you think?"

The meal was exotic—an alien stew made edible by inverting its amino acids—and the sky darkened very slowly, easing into night. For now the stage was Ord's, Alice demanding stories of his snow wars and other adventures. He told about canoeing mountain rivers and how he bred bear-dogs, preferring them to other pets; and he described the arrow wars fought in the summer, face paints in lieu of masks but the same essential rules. And of course he had games, bloodless fictional wars that he played by himself. Were any of the Blues his friends? Alice asked. Not yet. He had met them, and of course he knew which face belonged to which Family. And sometimes older Blues came to visit Lyman, and the others—.

"Why?" asked Alice.

Why what?

"Why build these careful antagonisms, passionate but essentially harmless? Ancient clans, elaborate rules . . . what's the purpose of it, Ord?"

His tutor claimed it was to teach them cooperation.

"Cooperation," she echoed. "Indeed, that's a key reason why the Families have thrived. But wouldn't bridging a mountain river serve the same function?"

Lyman had a different explanation. He claimed that war games were like tails on embryos. They were vestiges of something not needed anymore.

"That sounds a little truer," Alice replied.

Ord noticed that her face had grown empty. Did the topic bother her? Then why had she brought it up?

"Tell me, little brother. Why did we fight the Great Wars?"

There were thousands of would-be Families. They tried to enslave humanity, but the Wars defeated them. Sanchexes and Chamberlains helped save the multitudes, and in gratitude, they and the other good Families were allowed to keep their powers. They were given this land, and together the Wars' survivors fashioned the Peace.

"Noble images," Alice conceded.

Ord had stopped eating, but he found that he couldn't muster the will to push the half-empty bowl aside.

"Here's the crux of it, little brother. Somewhere in its history, every technological species will make the tools to become godlike. Immortal citizens will be capable of building worlds, or obliterating them. How a species responds to the challenge . . . well, that's what determines its fate, more often than not."

The galaxy was littered with ancient worlds torn apart by warfare. Sometimes Ord dreamed of sifting the rubble for chunks of burnt bone, learning about the vanished souls.

"Our powers are not cheap," said Alice, "and they're never plentiful. When the Wars began, there were only a few hundred billion people, but how many of them could be fitted with those new technologies? Very few. And many of those were corrupt. Perhaps, as you say, evil. But our species saved itself with a single wise deed. Ordinary people sought out the best thousand from their ranks. Not the wisest or the strongest, but the souls who would be least corrupted by their new talents."

This was familiar, and Ord kept nodding.

"Ian Chamberlain was a very unimportant man until he was selected. An unsuccessful man, by most accounts."

The boy looked at his bowl.

"How is your dinner?"

He said, "Fine."

Alice nodded, saying, "The Families are pledged to never injure any human being."

It was the fundamental law, something flowing in Ord's own blood.

"To you," she said, "the Peace must look immortal. Everlasting. Isn't that so, little brother?"

He began to shrug.

"Yet ten million years is no span at all. You'd be amazed how brief it feels to me."

He was tired of being amazed, he decided.

Alice rose to her feet. Before them was a little pond, bony fishes, alien and primitive, swimming lazily over soft white alien muds. She watched their motions for a long while, or pretended to watch them; then she told Ord, "Your brother is terrified of me. Of my presence here."

Lyman?

"Did you know that he has left the Earth?"

Ord said, "He's too young," with a boy's surety. "He's not allowed to go anywhere else."

"Yet he has. Many times." She laughed gently and easily. Her emerald gown was becoming muddy, a white fringe building as she walked around the pond. "He was on the Moon when I told everyone that I was coming to visit. He was seducing women, no doubt. Being a Chamberlain has its advantages, believe me. Still."

"Where else has he gone?"

"Around the solar system. Nothing astonishing." She paused, then turned to him. "Haven't you ever slipped out of these mountains? The sentries aren't perfect. No one needs to know."

"I haven't."

"But please tell me that you've been tempted." She seemed disappointed with him. "Haven't you been?"

Endless times, yes.

"Yet you obey the rules. How nice." She knelt, dipping a cupped hand into the pond and drinking from it. "Lyman doesn't obey, and that's why he's scared. I'm going to punish him while I'm here, he thinks, for traveling and for bringing girls into this house."

"But that's not against any rule," Ord countered.

"You're allowed to bring friends and lovers, of course. From inside or outside the Families, without doubt. But Lyman's girls aren't friends, they're convenient pieces of ass. They're thrilled to be with an authentic Chamberlain, and that's why they can ignore how ugly he looks. Grotesque to more than a few of them, I can promise you."

Ord remembered the finned woman in the swimming pool.

Standing again, Alice dried her hand with the gown.

After a minute, Ord asked, "Where is this world?"

"Inside a dust cloud. Hidden."

"Is this where you were? Before you came here, I mean."

She closed her hands into fists, sighed and said, "Everyone wants to know where I was. Where I came from."

Ord's belly ached, and not because of the dinner.

"Tell them, little brother. I was at the Core." She paused, a smile beginning and failing. Her face seemed to wrestle with her mouth, a strange lost expression winning. Then she said, "I came straight from the Core. Which was a long journey, even for me."

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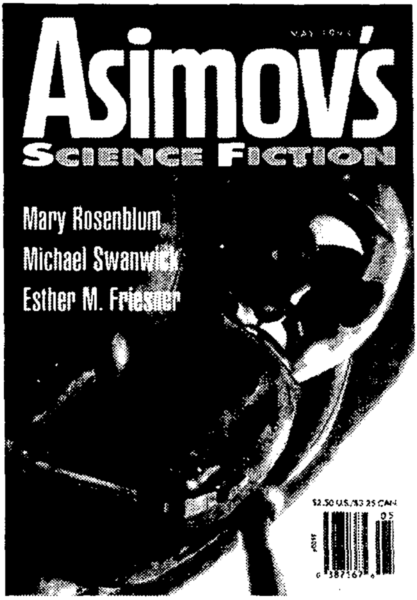
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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

People older than One Hundred didn't require starships. They could convert themselves to massless particles, moving at light-speed yet remaining conscious. Ord tried to imagine such an existence; and to say something, to be involved, he mentioned, "Lyman wants to work at the Core. As a terraformer."

Which she had to know. Tilting her head, she tried the same failed smile again. "A good Chamberlain goal, isn't it?"

The Core was famous for black holes and dust clouds, plus billions of star systems left sterilized by explosions and intense radiation. The Families had made it safe enough to colonize. Humans and aliens had room to expand, no legal claims held by any species.

"The Core," Alice whispered, smiling at Ord, no light in her face and her words leaden. "It's a lovely place. Too many stars for me to count, little brother."

He doubted it.

She strolled over to him. Her bare feet left narrow prints in the mud. With one hand, she held him beneath his jaw, blue eyes locked on his eyes, and with an irresistible strength she brought him to his feet, a cold voice telling him, "You could grow a tail. I could activate the old genes, and you'd grow one now. You have that power."

"I don't understand," Ord whispered. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?" She let go of him and turned away, her gown seeping a green light as night fell. "Whatever I'm talking about, little brother, it isn't tails. You can be certain of it."

"Then what?"

Ord breathed and said, "Then we talked about tomorrow."

"What about tomorrow?"

"About snowfare—"

"Nothing else about the Core?" Lyman was pacing, Ord watching him while sitting on his brother's enormous bed. "Well, at least now we know where she came from. If she is telling the truth, of course."

Why wouldn't she?

" 'I'm not talking about tails.' Is that what she said?"

Ord nodded. "Basically."

"War." His brother's voice was ominous. Soft. "She was at the Core, and some kind of war broke out."

"I don't think so."

Lyman stopped and stared at him. "Why not?"

All he could offer was, "I have a feeling. It's something else entirely, I'm sure."

Lyman glanced at his girlfriends.

"Alice gave me a plan," Ord continued. "For tomorrow. It involves Ravleen—"

"But what else did she say about the Core?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

Ord shook his head, trying to appear certain.

Lyman picked up one of the girlfriends, then he set her down again.

"What you need to do," Alice had told Ord, "is earn your redemption. With the Golds, and Ravleen too. And here's how you can do it, easily." Although to him it had seemed like a complicated scheme—

—and now Lyman moaned, "Something awful is happening. And that's why she's come here, no doubt about it." He wiped the perspiration from his face. "It's one of the aliens, or all of them. They've decided to fight us for the Core."

But wouldn't they have seen trouble on the universal-walls? Ord couldn't believe such a thing would remain secret.

"Whatever it is," Lyman promised, "I'm going to make a general call. For any nearby adults. I'll tell them . . . nothing . . . and ask them to hurry home at once. . . ."

It wasn't war; Ord was sure.

He remembered how their sister had kept saying, "Redemption," again and again. That powerful creature had stood in front of him, her gown soiled with the white muds; and she had assured him, "You must be redeemed. It's all my fault, but I can make everything better for you."

Her inadequate face was somewhere else, its eyes closing.

"Redemption," she had muttered one last time.

It wasn't a god's face, or a god's voice; and Ord had felt so very sorry for her, and everyone.

7

"Our mountains have shrunk since I last saw them. There's been erosion, of course, and the crust beneath has slumped . . . and I was tempted to fix them, at first glance . . . with my proverbial pinkie, I could lift these dead lumps of stone into space, if I wished, and fling them into the sun. . . ."

—Alice's testimony

Ravleen wore a simple cast and sling, down to one good shoulder and arm; yet somehow she seemed larger today, more dangerous, walking in front of her assembled troops, not speaking. A light dry snow was falling. Ravleen paused and let herself smile for a moment, looking at the high gray clouds. Then she said, "I need to know what's happening." She said, "I need a patrol. Two people. Volunteers."

Ord glanced at Xo, then down at his own boots.

"Who wants to?" Ravleen continued. "Anyone?"

With a sense of drama, Xo stepped forward.

"Good." The smile brightened. "Now pick your partner."

"Ord."

"Wrong choice," she responded. Then she motioned to her lieutenant, saying, "Tule will go with you."

The girl gave a confused low moan.

"We have three minutes," Ravleen warned them. "Take radios and rations and drop over the south wall. I want reports. Find out what the Blues are doing. And harass them, always."

Tule was a good soldier; she managed a nod of affirmation.

Xo stepped up to Ord, saying, "I tried. Too bad you can't come, it'll be exciting out there."

"I bet so."

Xo looked at his eyes, asking, "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing," Ord lied. "I just wish I was with you."

"Except you're not," Ravleen growled, marching up to punch Ord with her good arm. She smacked his shoulder, in warning, then said, "I want you here with me. You know I do, friend."

The Blues fired early—a few moments early—and their cannon slug hit a girl in the back. Everyone yelled, "Violation!" But she was just stunned, little harm done. Then Ravleen said, "Positions," and waved them over to the south wall. "Go."

Tule and Xo dropped rope ladders and started down. Tule was slow and clumsy, catching her leg when her ladder twisted. Xo hit the pasture and ran; and an instant later the Blues saw him, voices screaming, their cannons turned and firing as their troops charged from two sides.

"Run," shouted Ravleen. "Pick up your feet, Tule. Go."

Blue-faced targets swept into range. Ord shot well, wondering if Alice was helping his aim. But she had promised not to help, not that way, and he missed often enough to believe it was all him. Tule was hit and hit again, and she would fall and pick herself up and take a sloppy step before falling again. But Xo never slowed, never looked backward. He sprinted into deep snow, and Ord saw him leap off the first cliff—a fair drop, but cushioned by drifts—and he saw a pair of Blues on his trail, firing from the cliff and jumping after him.

Tule was down for good. The Blues surrounded her, kicking her even when she cried out, "Give, give."

Ord stopped firing. He found himself watching the battle with a sense of detachment. Poor Tule was picked up and carried away. The other Blues fired and retreated, glad to have their first prisoner. All this noise and energy seemed to amount to nothing. Ord felt indifferent. Suddenly he was thinking about Alice, and the Core; and sometimes, in secret, he spoke to his sister, certain that she could hear him.

The bombardment resumed. Squad B manned the cannons until Ravleen replaced them with C. "From now on," she told them, "you've got a new job."

Nobody spoke.

"Take the keep apart. Make blocks out of the snow." She etched her plan in the rampart's ice. "Stack the blocks here. And here. And get it done this morning."

One boy said, "We'd rather fight."

Ravleen stared at Ord. "For now, no. No."

The squad bristled but said nothing.

And their leader popped Ord in the head, using her hard cast. "Then I've got another lousy job for you," she promised. "For the afternoon, and you'll like it even less."

Xo eluded his pursuers for a few hours, but they were faster than him, easily tracking him in the deep snow. In the early afternoon, both prisoners were carried up to the pasture, gagged and blindfolded, then set in plain view under a tiny white flag. "You're next," the Blues called out in a practiced voice. "We'll melt your fort and then you, Golds. Soon."

Tule was embarrassed. It showed. And undoubtedly Xo was inventing excuses to explain his capture.

A new assault began on the east, but Ord's squad saw none of it. They were below, doing work meant for robots, hands cold despite their gloves and their backs aching from the hard cutting and lifting. Everyone said, "The big attack is tomorrow. Tomorrow." There was excitement, and nervousness, but it was all just a game. This was a prattle used for decades, and it had to be the same kind of noise Alice had made when she was like them.

"Tomorrow," they told each other.

But not Ord.

They consciously ignored him, and he discovered that he didn't care like he should care. It was as if there was a traitor inside him, and the traitor announced itself with, of all things, indifference.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," Ord replied. "How's prison?"

Xo shrugged and removed his mask. "Tiny. Boring. Cold."

"Too bad." They were in the trees above the pasture, on the main trail. From here the fort looked strong, tall and secretive, the rotting east wall showing only the faint beginnings of a slump. Ord had been the last one to leave it, and he had sat here, waiting for Xo. Alice had promised that the boy would come this way, out of habit. And he would be alone, Tule walking anywhere but with him. "How did they catch you?" Ord asked. "What went wrong?"

"They cheated, I think. Illegal equipment, I'm almost sure."

"Should we report them?" You went to your siblings who in turn complained to theirs. "We could tell your brothers—"

"Later. Maybe."

Ord nodded and stood up.

"How's Ravleen? Still furious with you?"

Ord removed his mask, pointing to some of his bruises.

"I hate her," Xo promised. "I wish you'd broken both arms."

"Maybe I will."

They began to walk. Some noise came from the city—the musical rise and fall of a siren—then the snowfall blotted it out, or it ceased.

Xo said, "I wish we were done."

"So do I."

"They've stuck me into a prison box. It's ridiculous."

Boxes were cramped and soundproofed, the heat bled out of them.

"I'm bored," the boy complained.

Ord paused and looked at Xo, then he looked everywhere else. Then just as Alice had told him, he said, "We can be home by noon tomorrow, if you want."

A hopeful little smile surfaced.

"Ravleen has a plan."

Xo said, "That's against the rules," and laughed, shaking his head. "I'm a prisoner of war. You can't tell me anything."

They weren't far from where Xo had begged to be hit with the careful stone. "We're shoring up the east wall. Making it strong again."

"How?"

"With the keep. Except it doesn't have enough snow." He paused, then said, "That's why we're robbing snow from the west wall. It's got too much anyway. Remember my gargoyle?" He drew a dramatic X on the boy's chest. "It's thinnest below the gargoyle."

Xo wasn't speaking, or breathing. This was against every rule, and the wickedness was delicious. He smiled and then stopped smiling, as if someone might notice; and he asked, "How thin is thin?"

"Like this." Ord put up his hands.

"She'll know I told. Ravleen will."

"How can you know anything?" Ord countered. "If Ravleen tells Tule anything, then Tule's the likely suspect."

"But will the Blues believe me?"

"Maybe not, but it's easy enough to test. And if you're right, they might not have time to cut a hole through the east wall anyway."

The boy stepped back and looked around, shivering as if he was cold.

"Who knows?" he muttered. "Maybe I'll crack. First thing in the morning, before they put me in that stupid box."

8

"Boredom can claim some of the blame. What new challenges had we attacked in the last thousand millennia? And there was a genuine urge to accomplish something good. And most important was the idea itself. The plan. We were intoxicated. Drunk and in love, it seemed so perfectly possible and lovely to us. . . ."

—Alice's testimony

A single set of stairs climbed to the penthouse, in a tight spiral, the stairwell itself decorated with an elaborate mural. Yesterday, Ord was too nervous to pay attention. Today, the mural seemed to force itself on him, showing him various Chamberlains caught in the midst of historic and heroic acts. He saw worlds rebuilt, aliens embraced, and the far edges of the galaxy explored. His own motions caused the scenes to change, the artwork fluid and theoretically infinite; and riding on a single step, hand on the polished railing, Ord found it all quite strange, thinking of the care spent on a mural that almost no one ever saw.

He was deposited at the penthouse door. Touching the milky crystal, he said, "It's working. Just like you promised."

The door dissolved, Alice standing before him.

"It's working," he repeated, breathing in little gulps. "Did you watch everything?"

"Enough of it." Something was different now. Worrisome. Alice wore a heavy dark robe, the room beyond black, unbordered, and cold. But she did smile at him, telling him, "Thank you," and then, "I'm glad it's going well," with a mixture of pride and pleasure. She was watching a point beside him, saying, "That Nuyen is a fool. Don't you agree?"

Ord felt uneasy, saying nothing.

"I would invite you inside," Alice continued, "but this isn't a good time. I am sorry."

Her face seemed simple, worn down. If she'd had red eyes, he would have guessed that she had been crying. And perhaps she was crying, in a fashion. He reminded himself how little of her was visible, and he asked, "Are you all right?"

Her eyes tracked toward him, no other response offered.

Ord stepped backward and dropped his gaze.

"I'm just distracted," Alice explained, "and tired. My long trip has caught up with me at last."

That seemed very unlikely.

And she told him, "Tomorrow, once you're done fighting, I want you to come tell me everything, little brother. I promise. We'll have a celebration, to enjoy your triumph." She paused, then said, "Stop worrying, please. Everything will be fine."

He said, "I know," without confidence.

Then the door began to reform as she said, "Good night." For an instant, it sounded as if she were crying. But then he realized, with cynicism, that someone like Alice might conjure any emotion, put on any face . . . sadness was just a different kind of creation. . . .

He pushed the thought aside, turned and stepped back onto the stairs.

Two robots waited in Ord's room—security models—and with gray voices, in unison, they said, "You're wanted in the main arena. No, don't change clothes. Go now."

"Who's there?" he stammered.

"Lyman, and the others." The robots were silent, probably asking what they could tell him. "Several hundred adults have arrived today. They wish to speak with you."

The main arena was underground, deep inside the Chamberlain mountain—a vast room with seating for twenty thousand, false granite and perfect wood covering the walls and arched ceiling—and the brothers and sisters looked inconsequential with so much space around them. They sat in a block before the stage, and Ord had to wonder: Why here? Why not in a smaller arena? But then he realized this was as far from the penthouse as any place, which might be important. Were security baffles in use? From the stage a single brother waved at him. *Lyman.* Sitting beside him was a sister, a giant figure, three meters tall and built out of light and conjured flesh. "Up here," said Lyman. "We're just starting."

Every step was hard work, every breath a labor.

"Ord?" said the giant sister. "My name is Vivian. Eleven hundred and twenty."

Eleven twenty was nothing. He felt like telling her that he wasn't impressed, that he knew their Twelve and that she was *nothing* beside Alice. And maybe Vivian read his thoughts, taking his hand and squeezing, her hand feeling like heated plastic, almost burning him before she said, "I'm glad to meet you." Her presence was tangible, her energies making the air and stage vibrate. "Sit, if you would. Sit here and talk with us."

A chair appeared between his brother and sister.

Lyman leaned close and said, "Relax."

A couple of hundred faces watched them. The oldest adults were giants, wearing Chamberlain faces and bodies out of tradition. To be mannerly. Vivian had the highest rank, it seemed. Now she leaned forward, telling Ord, "Your big brother did what was right, you know. Perhaps he should have warned us sooner, but we understand. We do."

"What do you want?" Ord whispered.

"We need your help," Vivian explained. "I understand that our sister likes you? That for some reason she's taken an interest in you? Not that she dislikes any of us, of course. But you've spoken to her—"

"Yes."

"More than once, according to Lyman."

"Just now, a few minutes ago." His voice was soft and loud. He could barely hear himself, but the words were enlarged and thrown across the arena. "Is Alice in trouble?"

"Why? Do you think she should be in trouble?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

Vivian made him notice her smile. Her face was incomplete, a patch of strange gray light on one side of her forehead. "She's come from the Core, is that right? Ord? Do you hear me?"

He nodded. "Straight from there."

"But has she told you why she was there?"

He didn't like Vivian; he didn't appreciate her tone. But this was important, and he took pains to say, "She told me that she came here from there and that's all. That's what I know."

Lyman leaned close again, following some script. Ord realized that he was here to put their little brother at ease, prompting him when necessary, and he was sick with worry and exhaustion. "She was at the Core," he muttered. "We know it now."

"We're certain," Vivian echoed.

"She was working on a special project," Lyman continued. "With other Chamberlains and Sanchexes . . . with nearly half of the Families, no one younger than One Hundred."

"Doing what?" the boy asked.

Lyman shut his eyes, saying nothing.

Vivian told him, "It is a secret," with her voice betraying frustration. Yet she made herself laugh, as if to defuse the tension. As if to fool Ord. "I can't get access to their secret, little brother. Though I have sources who claim, and with some reason, that they're working on FTL travel."

"It's not possible," Ord replied. "Nothing goes faster than light."

"Perhaps you're right," his sister said. "Perhaps this is just a story meant to fool prying eyes."

Ord felt himself sinking away.

"Eleven Chamberlains were there," Vivian continued. "But now all except two of them have departed, including Alice. She arrived here the instant we saw her depart, but the others have taken other directions. Why? And why have the other Families departed in the same mysterious way?" She paused, then said, "I don't know, honestly. I have questions that I would love to ask."

Murmurs spread, then collapsed.

"Two Chamberlains are left there?" Ord managed. "Where is *there?*"

Everyone wanted to know. People whispered among themselves until Vivian lifted one of her hands, waiting for silence. Then she said, "They were clustered beside the central black hole, inside its envelope of gases and plasmas. They've been there for several thousand years, it seems. Honestly, I don't know what type of work they were pursuing."

Ord shifted his weight, hands wrestling with one another.

Vivian asked, "Has she given any hint of an explanation? Has our dear sister given you one clue?"

He whispered, "No."

Then he asked, "Why can't you ask her?"

She blinked and made a show of swallowing, then admitted, "Alice has set up barriers. A part of me is wrestling with them now, but she seems adamant to exclude everyone but you."

Ord looked at the audience, reading the same lost, worried expressions. Even Vivian seemed like a little girl mystified by events, angered by her limitations and perhaps glad too. In secret. She could do nothing of substance. No clear responsibilities could be set on her oversized shoulders. It seemed obvious to Ord . . . and suddenly he wondered if it was his insight, or if perhaps Alice had given it to him.

"When do you see Alice again, little brother?"

Ord blinked, trying to remember.

Lyman appreciated his confusion, touching an arm and saying,

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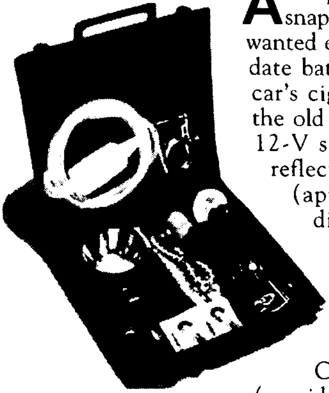

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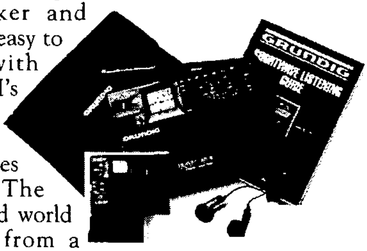

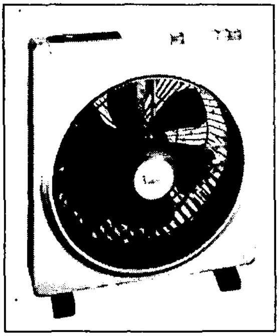

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"What's important is that we go on with our ordinary lives. As well as we can, Ord. But Alice has come here for some reason, and if she wishes to tell us anything, we need to listen."

"Tomorrow," he said. "I'll see her then."

"When you do," Vivian instructed, "ask if she will talk with us. Will you do that for us?"

"That's all we want, " said Lyman.

"Please," said the giant sister.

"Please," said two hundred mouths, in unison, whispers rising to the pink granite ceiling and echoing back down at them again.

9

"Ian rarely told war stories. But once, I remember, coming home after a hard day's snowball fight, he found me on the yard, stopped me, and launched into a long tale about finding our enemies hiding in a certain solar system. They had built redoubts out of worlds, and he explained how he had grabbed comets, accelerating them to near-light velocities . . . how he had pummeled worlds until their crusts melted, our enemies slaughtered . . . and he wept at the end, and shook, still ashamed of his cruelty while his audience, this little girl, kept thinking what an enormous, wonderful snowball fight that must have been. . . !"

—Alice's testimony

In all but name, the Golds won the war that next morning.

The Electric Blues stuck to their old battle plan, troops charging the east wall and artillery firing from the west. But there was no final assault. When it seemed inevitable, there was a pause, a sudden lull, then the sound of motion, troops scrambling over slick terrain on the south. There was little pretense of subterfuge. Ravleen and Ord stood together on the south wall, and one of them smiled beneath her mask, satisfied with the world. The other wished he could feel relief, but there wasn't any. Nor was there any sense of dread and foreboding, which was a constant surprise to him. It was as if Ord was empty, all the worry drained from him; sometimes he couldn't even remember Alice or the Core, as if they had been carefully, thoroughly etched from his mind.

Ravleen noticed enough to ask, "What's the matter?" She poked him with a finger, telling him, "You look funny. What are you thinking?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

But she didn't press him, too happy to care. Today her cast was soft, without a sling; and with that bad arm she hugged Ord, every Gold watching them and everyone surprised.

Alice had been right.

A Sanchex would do anything for a victory, provided you left her pride intact.

"Beg for forgiveness," his sister had instructed. "Weep. Grovel. And tell her your plan between weepy moments. Trust me, she'll see its beauty. And she'll take it for herself."

For a deed that wasn't his fault, Ord had apologized . . . and didn't *his* pride matter too?

"It's happening," Ravleen whispered.

She said, "They believe the little shit."

Then she hugged Ord again, saying, "When the time comes, stand next to me." A wink, a smile, and she assured him, "That's only fair."

The Blues entered the pasture from the southwest, carrying their snowguns and grenades and finally showing their own flag, a blue rectangle flapping in the bright windy air. There was a pause as they gathered themselves, then they let out a roar, charging as cannons and mortars threw heat into the west wall. As promised, the ice beneath the gargoyle had been undermined. A squad of Blues surged through the sudden hole, excited and confident. There was moderate fire from above, plus some raucous cursing. The Golds were disconsolate, without question. The first squad beckoned for others, more than half of the Blues pouring into the courtyard, in less than a minute, marshaling and charging the flagpole, nothing between them and it but a crude little wall of fresh-cut ice—

—and there was a sound, wet and strong, and massive. Something was falling. A wedge of ice broke free of the west wall, sliding over the new hole as Ravleen shot to her feet, shouting:

"Fire."

It wasn't a fight. Ord stood behind the new wall, firing without aiming, without heart. Four squads fired double-shots at close range, knocking the enemy off their feet. Cannons on the west wall had been turned, barrels depressed, and the fourth cannon was on the ground, slugs of ice knocking people unconscious. Limbs were shattered. Facemasks and the flesh beneath were split open, blood bright against the white surfaces. And even still the Blues mounted a final charge, adrenaline carrying them over the wall, one girl able to put her hands on the pole's knotted rope an instant before Ravleen shot her from behind, in the head, her body limp and Ord watching her fall and lie still.

In days everyone would be well again, ready to play again. Yet Ord felt sad enough to cry, watching Ravleen lead her troops across the courtyard, driving their enemies into a corner and abusing anyone with a hint of fight left in them. Then the prisoners were disarmed and tied together; and Ravleen launched an assault on the enemy cannons, capturing them and more prisoners and chasing the rest into the woods.

Ord stayed behind, guarding Blues. He sat on the trampled snow with his gun empty, and after a while he couldn't hear the distant shouts. He watched the masked faces, thinking how the eyes looked angry and a little afraid, but not much, and even the anger seemed false. And it wasn't because this was only a game. They were too young to know how to be truly angry or honestly scared. They were children. Sitting there, thinking thoughts that weren't entirely his own, Ord tried to imagine a world filled with danger; and he couldn't. The part of him that was him looked at the fort and the clear bright sky, and he couldn't believe that this quiet wouldn't last for all time.

10

"Something did go wrong. We failed somewhere and knew it at once and could do nothing . . . and the worst of it was that we had time, too much time, to dwell on the failure . . . blaming one another, and Nature, the Almighty and even those awful people who had brought us forth into our miserable lives. . . !"

—Alice's testimony

The staircase was filled with brothers and sisters, half again as many as he had seen yesterday. The stairs were locked in place, no one moving but Ord, him climbing toward the penthouse and no one speaking louder than a whisper. "Good luck," they told him. The freckled, red-haired faces were grim and tired in many ways, and the climb seemed to last for ages. Halfway to the top, Ord was crying, wiping at his eyes with alternating sleeves. "Be strong," the whispers demanded. Yet the Chamberlain faces seemed anything but strong, in stark contrast to the heroic images in the mural. Lyman was the last face, Ord recognizing the long hair and something in the voice, his brother saying, "We're proud of you, you know."

Vivian emerged from the wall beside them, still tall, stepping out of the mural as if it was syrup and bending until her giant face was near enough to kiss Ord. "Alice is waiting, I think. That much I can see, I think." She paused, and the gray patch on her forehead brightened. "Listen to what she tells you, ask questions, and please tell her how much we'd like to see her. Soon."

Ord looked down the stairwell, faces watching him; then he thought to ask, "What's happening in the Core? Do you know?

Nobody spoke.

He looked at Vivian. "What can you see now?"

"Nothing new," she lied. Looking as winded as Ord felt, she sighed and put a large warm hand on his back, shepherding him toward the crystal door. "Good luck, little brother. You'll do well."

The doorway dissolved as it reformed behind him. He stopped, then the blackness was washed away with starlight. In an instant, with a faint dry sound, grass erupted from the twisting floor and grew seeds, the air filled with summer sounds and dampness. The stars were brilliant and colorful, and countless, separated by light-weeks, or less. At the sky's zenith was an oval, not large, velvety black and vague at its edges. This was the Core, Ord knew, and the oval was the giant shroud draped over the central black hole. This sky could be a live image—

"Exactly so," said a voice, close and soft.

—and around him was a terraformed world. Ord knelt and broke off a stem of grass, putting it to his mouth, tasting the green juice. It was earthly life. And as if to prove that point, an insect landed on his face and bit him, drawing blood before he swatted it, the little body smearing under his fingers.

"Walk," Alice instructed. "Straight on."

The room was a hilltop, and there were people—his size, his proportions—sitting in the brilliant darkness, watching the sky. It was a peaceful scene, familiar yet tied to an exotic place; and Ord was afraid, pausing and his heart beating faster.

"Who are they?" he whispered.

Alice was silent.

"Hello?" he tried.

A boy turned and said, "Hi. Who are you?"

Ord stepped close and gave his first name. The group repeated, "Ord," as Alice said, "Sit with them."

They weren't people but instead facsimiles conjured up with the grass and bugs. Below them was a city, a sprinkling of soft lights and darkness between. It was a pioneer community, not large, homes set in the middle of wide rich yards. A tiny crescent moon was rising over distant mountains. It seemed like a lovely world, larger than the Earth, its gravity stronger and the air tasting clean and new.

Faces smiled. The facsimiles weren't too different from him, their heads narrow and their hair abundant and long, tied into intricate braids that leaked their own soft light. They were the children of pioneers, the first generation born on this world. Like Ord, they had tough brains and rapid powers of healing. Like him, they could be decades old, no inherent end in their lives. But they'd never leave their flesh, they could only travel in starships, and if they wanted to terraform any world larger than a comet, they would have to work in teams, as a multitude, relying on numbers in place of Chamberlain skills.

And yet.

Someday they would have *children*. Not clones, but unique, even radical babies. They would marry and make families—institutions older than any Chamberlain—and each child would be unlike anyone on any of the million living worlds.

Ord felt envy, or Alice fed envy to him. Probably before he was old enough to leave the Earth, these children would fill this world with their descendants; then the multitudes would spill onto that little moon and whatever else circled the unseen sun. A great green explosion of life . . . and before Ord could hope to visit, this place would become mature and crowded. . . .

"You look warm," the facsimile boy observed. "Why don't you take off that silly suit?"

The snowsuit was damp with perspiration. Ord stripped to his underclothes, then he sat with them on the warm bristly grass. Without prompting, the others introduced themselves, by name, the last small girl saying, "Alice," and then, "Chamberlain."

She was dark as coal. "Chamberlain?" Ord echoed. "Is that your real name?"

"Of course," she replied. "A lot of people are named after the Families. At least here they are."

"You're not from here," said a second girl. "Are you?"

"But that's okay," said the boy, acting like their leader. "We like meeting people."

Ord asked, "Why use the Chamberlain name?"

"In thanks," she answered.

"Because," said the boy, "the Chamberlains help make all these suns behave. They keep gas from falling into the black holes. And we're very, very grateful for their help. Aren't we grateful?"

His friends nodded in unison, with fervor.

"Who terraformed this world?" Ord inquired.

"Alice," the children giggled. "The real one."

Then the boy added, "We're buying it from her." He spoke with pride, as if to say, "We buy only from the best."

The false Alice looked nothing like Ord's sister. Her face was as narrow as an ax blade, big black eyes reflecting starlight. Ord asked, "Have you ever seen Alice? Does she visit you?"

"Not now," the girl giggled. "Why would she?"

"What do you think of her?"

"She's a wonderful great person," the boy reported, no room for compromise. "Everyone knows *that*."

"I pray for her," the dark Alice confessed. "Every night, just before I sleep, I wish her nothing but the best."

Everyone nodded. Conviction hung thick in the air.

"Where's Alice now?"

Hands lifted, pointing to the cold black smear overhead.

"What is she doing there?"

"Working," said the boy. "With Chamberlains and other Families. Doing important experiments." He was pleased to report this news. "They've found ways to move faster than light. Easily."

Everyone but the dark Alice murmured in agreement.

"Soon," said the boy, "we'll be able to go anywhere. The Families will put the entire universe in our reach."

"No," said Alice.

Faces turned.

She had a quiet, firm voice. "That's not what they're doing."

The other children seemed surprised, but no one had a rebuke to offer.

"It's much more important than FTL. A million times more." Suddenly she had his sister's face, round and pale. Nobody else noticed. Looking at Ord, she asked, "Why can't everyone have Alice's powers?"

"It's a rule," he responded.

"But *why?*"

He paused, thinking hard. "If everyone was like Alice—"

"—there wouldn't be room in this galaxy. Every Alice needs energy and space and fancy work to do." The real Alice took Ord's hand, squeezing and explaining, "This galaxy is just too small of a pasture. If we want to be like her, we need more grass."

Some of the children laughed.

Ord swallowed and asked, "But if we could go anywhere—?"

"Everywhere has life already. Everywhere has its Families and its multitudes, no room for the likes of Alice." She shrugged, sadness showing on her face. "Certainly not for trillions and trillions of full-grown Alices."

Ord nodded, glancing at the black smear.

"But there's something better than FTL," she promised. "Put enough energy into a tiny place, in just the proper way, and a fresh young universe will precipitate from nothing. Am I right, little brother?"

He remembered something mentioned by his tutor. It was a theory, ancient but useless; vacuums themselves could create universes that would separate from theirs. An umbilical cord would exist, then dissolve, and it happened constantly, too swift to notice.

Ord felt a sudden chill.

"The trick," said Alice, "is to keep your umbilical *open*. What's the good in making a new universe that you can't see? Wouldn't it be nice if you could enter it and learn what's possible? Can you imagine the challenges? The potentials? For everyone, of course. . . ."

Alice was weeping, wiping her face with both hands.

A little boy said, "I don't understand you."

"Imagine if everyone, every Family and all of humanity, could extend themselves into endless new universes. Each of us might have our own, each with its own wonders. Each of you would be given Alice's powers, then more, and you could dive down the cord and close it up after you, if you dared." She grabbed Ord's hand, her hands cold and wet. "Isn't that the loveliest sweetest possibility? What would you do, little one, if you had it in your power to make it true?"

Something is wrong—

—and she said, "Precisely," with a dead gray voice. "As wrong as wrong has ever been, I should hope."

Again he looked at the black oval, a single golden spark blossoming at its center. But it faded and vanished, lost . . . an illusion, he told himself . . . nothing else. . . !

Alice turned to the children, explaining to them, "We succeeded. We created a universe and the umbilical cord. But what's difficult, perhaps even impossible, is to leave the way open just enough. No more than the perfect amount, you pray."

The sky brightened. A great soundless flash of light obscured the stars, blue-white and sudden, and the children began to mutter among themselves, and moan.

Alice was saying, "Our universe might be someone's creation. Not an original thought, I admit . . . but perhaps some other Family, in some unknown place, produced this . . . perhaps they preside over us now . . . just as their universe was created in turn. . . ."

The children had hands lifted over their eyes. They weren't real children, just facsimiles; yet Ord found himself terrified for them, leaping to his feet, shouting, "Run! Hide!" He grabbed one little boy, trying to make him start for home. But the first wave of heat and hard radiations pierced them. In an instant, the long grass had burst into flames, and the boy squirmed in agony, then died, his body shriveled and blackened, blowing away as ash. And Ord screamed as the world beneath him evaporated. He felt it shatter, an inconsequential bit of grime; and he was twisting in the scalding light, screaming until a familiar soft voice whispered:

"Relax."

Alice said:

"The new universe has flowed into ours, for just this moment."

And with a pained dead voice, she told him:

"You don't know how sorry we feel . . . you can't know . . . tell everyone, please . . . will you, little one?"

Only Lyman was waiting for him. The others had seen the same feed, had gone to the nearest arena to watch the walls. The two brothers stood at the top of the empty stairwell, both trembling, Lyman holding the wall with his hands, saying with a wisp of a voice, "At least we know. We know what it is."

Ord held himself, soaked with perspiration and wearing nothing but his underclothes.

"Vivian thinks it's temporary . . . it won't last. . . ." Lyman couldn't stand anymore, dropping to his knees and beating the floor with his fists, no strength in his arms. Finally, he asked, "Will Alice talk to us now?"

"I don't know," Ord confessed. Then he tried to apologize with a low choking voice.

But his brother didn't care. He shrugged and said, "You don't know how terrible this is going to be. Nobody can."

Nobody?

"Which is a blessing, I think." Another useless blow to the floor, then Lyman looked up at him. "If we knew, we couldn't live. The grief would crush us, Ord. No one could survive a moment, knowing how awful this will be. . . ."

11

"We accepted our duty, at last. A few of us remained behind, fighting to close the umbilical even when we knew it couldn't be closed prematurely . . . heroic deaths after a catastrophic blunder . . . and the bulk of us rushed toward places distant and populated, places where we could save other lives . . . and then it was decided that one of us, a

volunteer, should journey home, home to the Earth, for the express purpose of standing trial, to admit guilt in a public way . . . hundreds of billions doomed, human and alien, and a single soul promising to swallow as much blame as possible. . . ."

—Alice's testimony

In the morning, before the local dawn, the Chamberlain mansion sent word to the government that Alice was barricaded in the penthouse. A chaotic, oftentimes bitter group of elected officials decided that high-ranking Nuyens would accompany the appropriate legal officers. The suspected murderess would be arrested, hopefully without incident. That no existing prison could hold her was deemed a minor problem. More than once, in soft dry voices, the officers remarked that if a Twelve wished, she could leave the Earth a vivid red drop of liquid stone and iron.

It had been a clear cold night in the high mountains. That oddity of climate helped make the officers even more uneasy, stepping onto the famous ground and seeing the house, vast and brilliant in the early light. Huge bear-dogs watched them with indifference. The much less impressed Nuyens led the way, taking them under the PRIDE AND SACRIFICE emblem and upstairs. A single Chamberlain—a sister of modest rank—joined their strange procession, telling everyone how sorry she was and how this wasn't anyone's fault except for a tiny few members of many, many Families.

"Not *our* Family," responded one of the Nuyens.

Vivian glared at the speaker, then turned and put the stairs into motion again.

Ord watched them pass. Dressed in a clean snowsuit, he was standing in the hallway, sleepless but alert. Everyone ignored him, and when they were above he stepped into the stairwell, leaned over the railing and watched how they curled higher and higher, his eyes losing them with distance and the glare of the lights.

As always, the bear-dogs begged for attention.

He ignored them, hurrying to the tube and running fast through the sunny woods, then across the pasture. But only Ravleen was waiting at the fort. She was sitting on the west wall, her cast removed, her eyes red and sleepless. "You're late," she warned, then smiled. Then she told him with a strong certain voice, "That explosion won't reach us here. It's not large enough."

Ord knew that already.

"We did calculations," she continued. "It's a lot like a supernova, only bigger. Hotter. Dust clouds and distance will keep the Earth safe."

And the melted planets, he thought. And the dead people.

"What are you thinking?"

Ord looked over the pasture. Yesterday's bootprints gave the snow a ragged, exhausted appearance. "Nobody's going to attack today," he ventured.

"If they do," Ravleen said, "we'll stop them."

"I was tired of being at home," he confessed, swallowing with a tight dry throat. "I watched my wall all night—"

"Talk about something else," Ravleen warned him.

"What?"

"Nothing." The red eyes looked out of the clean gold mask. "Let's just sit and say nothing."

A light breeze lifted their flag, then dropped it. On a day like this, Ord knew, they should have heard city sounds; but not this morning, and the silence was unnerving. Everyone everywhere was scared. It wasn't just the explosion or the deaths, it also was the Peace itself. Would it survive? The sacred trusts had been violated, but could some sense of normalcy return? And when? And what about the Families themselves—?

A slow creaking made Ord blink and turn. Someone was climbing one of the rope ladders. Ravleen picked up her snowgun, watching the familiar figure scramble over the parapet to join them.

"Ah," she growled, "the traitor."

Ord was surprised to see Xo. He should be the last Gold willing to come here. But he stood before them, smiling so that they could see his teeth, saying, "I escaped." He was nervous and obvious, forcing a laugh before he said, "A legal escape. Nobody came to guard me this morning."

Ravleen kept her hand on the gun.

Xo told her, "Congratulations for winning." Then he turned to Ord, adding, "Our plan sure worked, didn't it?"

"What plan?" asked Ravleen.

"Didn't you tell her?" The boy acted horrified. He removed his mask to show his expression, saying, "We planned it together, Ravleen. I would pretend to be a traitor, and Ord—"

"Shut up."

"—Ord would go to you—"

"You're lying. Shut up."

The boy closed his mouth, then grinned. Ord saw the new tooth, whiter than the others, and something about the grin made him bristle.

"I'm no traitor," Xo told them.

Nobody spoke.

Then he said, "*Your* Families were the ringleaders." The tone was superior and a little shrill. "We didn't even help you. I heard all about it. My brothers and sisters were talking, and they said they warned you that it was dangerous and they didn't want any part of it—"

"Quiet," Ord snapped.

"—and you did it *anyway*. And did it *wrong*."

Ravleen stared down into the courtyard.

Xo swallowed and straightened his back, then with great satisfaction said, "Now you'll have to pay for the damages and deaths. All your wealth is going to be spent, and you'll be poor. You won't even be Families anymore! It's as if we set a trap, and in you *walked—*!"

Ravleen shot him in the head, no warnings. She put twin slugs into his mouth, knocking him off the wall. Then she stood and looked down at Xo, sprawled out on his back, and she winked at Ord, saying, "Watch." And she jumped after him, feet first, boots landing on the boy's chest and her momentum shattering ribs and lungs and the heart beneath her.

His chest crushed, Xo flung his arms into the air, hands grasping at nothing and then falling limp.

Ravleen began to kick him. His body had died, past all suffering; but she worked on the face with a sick thoroughness, without pause, kicking and kicking until she was finally exhausted; then she stepped back and looked up on the wall, telling Ord, "You can help me."

Except that Ord wasn't standing there. It was a sister, some other Chamberlain, and she smiled without smiling, eyes full of misery and joy.

"Help you?" she asked, pleased with this most tiny revenge.

Then she said, "Another time, perhaps. But thank you for offering."

12

"I watched them force the penthouse door. I watched them not find me. I did enjoy their panic, I'll admit, but in all honesty I wasn't actually hiding from them. And then one of the Nuyens engaged her treacherous little brain and decided to look inside the original mansion, the majority of me *waiting in my one-time bedroom, peering outdoors at a vivid cold winter from ten million years ago. . . .*

—Alice's testimony

The city was trees, towering green trees with natural chambers in the trunks and large branches, tiny luxury apartments housing several million smallish people with prehensile tails and strong limbs. Almost everyone was inside, watching the live feeds from the Core. For a long while, Ord walked unnoticed down a wide avenue, feeling like the last living person on the planet. He left his snowsuit on, wiping sweat from his eyes. A small park opened up before him, and he saw motion, then tiny brown shapes. He approached the children with a certain caution, practicing his smile, and when they saw him, they stopped and stared. Too young to watch the Core and understand, they also were too young to recognize a Chamberlain on sight. One boy laughed and said, "You look funny. What kind of person are you?"

"Are you sick?" asked a young girl.

"Funny hair," said a third child. "Sick funny hair!"

Ord took a breath and held it. There were nearly a dozen children gawking at him. To the boy who had said *You look funny,* he said, "Here," and handed him the old snowgun. "For you."

"What is it?" the boy sputtered.

Ord didn't explain. Removing his boots, he asked, "Who wants these?"

A tiny hand reflexively shot up.

He gave away his boots, then his mask. Then he removed his snowsuit, and paused, and told his astonished little audience, "I am sorry. I want you to know, I'm sorry."

They didn't understand why he should apologize, but the words were locked in their minds.

"And Alice is sorry too," he added, flinging the snowsuit behind them and turning, running off on bare feet as the children began making claims and counterclaims for this strange unusable prize.

Ord trotted back to the estate, the mountains and the snow.

And only then, gazing out of the jungle at the towering white ridges, did he realize that he'd never seen his home from this vantage point. From outside. And he ran faster, crossing a line, the first wet pancakes of snow burning his toes, causing him to run faster still. ●

THE DUSTS OF PALAMON ARE BLISS

The dusts of Palamon are bliss.
The warnings, tourists, are a lie,
those words that hover in the air,
"Remove your mask, breathe deep, and die"

I landed here among the First;
I saw the cloud our landing raised;
I saw it settle into mist.
I was among the ones who praised

the purple dust our footsteps made
to listeners back beyond the stars.
I called you here to take the air,
without those foolish masks you wear.

The dust of Palamon are bliss.
Those stories filled with bloody rage,
that follows, as they say it must,
your naked breathing of these dusts,

the tales of frenzied, boundless lust
that drove that first brave maskless crew
to tear each other limb from limb
are not, and never will be, true.

I am the last of those who came
first here, the Lost, whose ghosts still cry,
"Throw off your masks, breathe deep, and dare
dance naked in the cloudy air!
The dusts of Palamon are bliss!"

The dusts of Palamon *are* bliss.

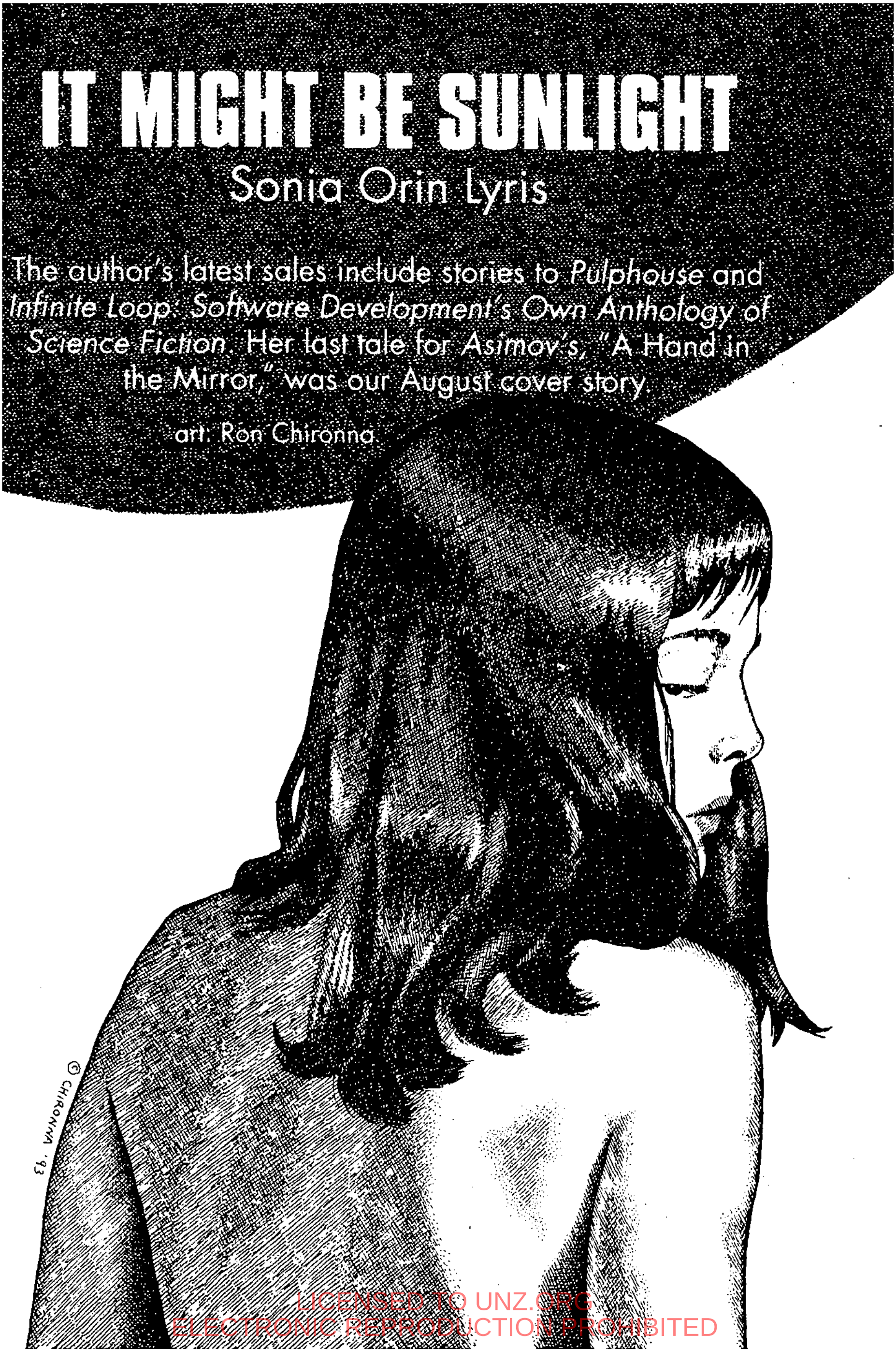
—William John Watkins

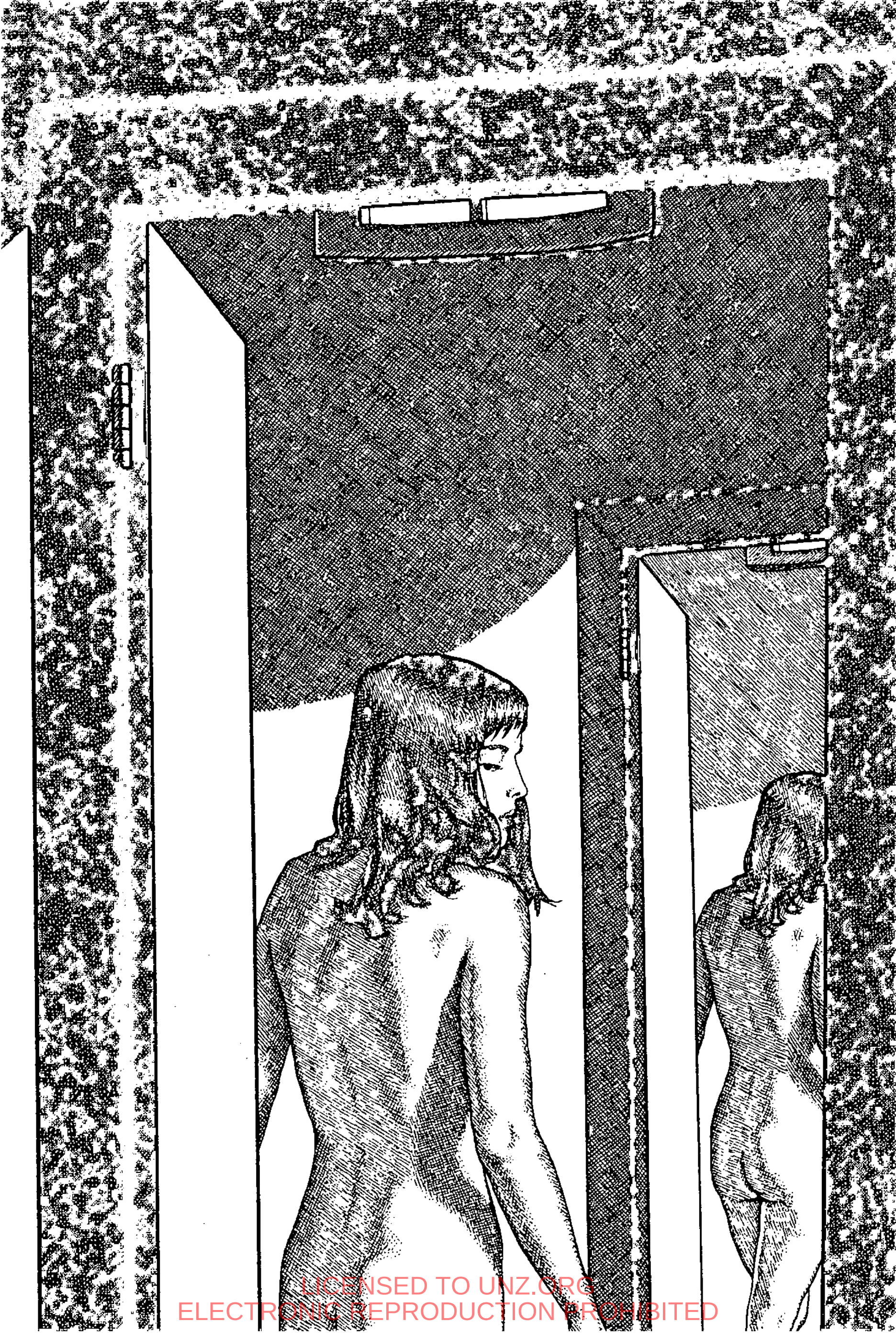
IT MIGHT BE SUNLIGHT

Sonia Orin Lyris

The author's latest sales include stories to *Pulphouse* and *Infinite Loop: Software Development's Own Anthology of Science Fiction*. Her last tale for *Asimov's*, "A Hand in the Mirror," was our August cover story.

art: Ron Chironna





Light that might be sunlight comes from the room's many high windows.

I turn and look at this large, familiar room, the only sound the brush of my bare feet on cool marble. Round walls encircle me. Above is a dome, made of many windows. There are no doors.

I hug myself, to feel skin against skin. I scratch myself. I wear no clothes, but I am not cold. Not here.

The room smells of nothing. Or perhaps of dust.

I turn around and around, but there is nothing to mark one direction from another, except the light on the walls that comes through the high windows. The walls are white, the floor shades of grey. Through the dome windows I see a blue that might be sky.

Just like yesterday.

The air is quieter than the dreamless sleep from which I have recently woken. The silence fills the room, and wraps me as though in a silk cocoon.

Good morning, Kelly, he says.

His words do not disturb the silence. They come to me, like my own thoughts. Only different.

I nod.

I hope you had a pleasant sleep, he says silently, this one who I call Captor, and sometimes Tormentor. This, my only companion.

Is the sleeping supposed to be for my pleasure? I ask.

The question is slow; I have to hold it in my mind so that he can read it. It has been a long night since we last spoke. I have to remember how to do it.

Your pleasure, he answers, his crystal bright thought forming in what was an empty corner of my mind. *Yes. This is all for your pleasure.*

I shake my head. *Open the cage,* I say, *and let me out. Then I will have what pleasure is left to me.*

There are eyes in my mind now. Or maybe not, but that's how it feels. The eyes watch me and are sad. They blink.

If I let you free, you will perish.

I nod, unsurprised. We have had this conversation before.

Then he smiles into my mind. *Today* he says, his eyes wide and sparkling with anticipation, *today we will have many pleasures.*

How long, I ask, *since yesterday?*

The eyes close. I taste dismay.

That would only upset you, he says.

How long, I repeat.

I sharpen my determination, imagining my need to know as a hard surface around my mind, using my confidence to harden my resolve to know.

I do not want you to be upset, he says. *Are you sure you would not rather discover that today is your ninth birthday?*

Each time I wake he is more reluctant to give me a measure of the time passed. This time, like the last, he tries to bribe me.

Now he swims through my memories, each one brought alive by his touch.

Suddenly I am nine. I sit at a table with seven other children. I smell strawberries, cake, and vanilla ice cream. The memory expands until it is more vivid than my sparse present.

I cling to my anger at his manipulation, and he is momentarily confused. We have no privacy, my former self and I, and he does not understand why I should resent his intrusions. He only understands that the memories affect me.

His reaction is to expand the memory until it fills me, until it entirely replaces my present. I struggle to remember that I am not nine. I slip.

My friends sit around me at the dining table. The blond boy at the end of the table is destined to be my lover some years hence, but I have no hint of that now. Or maybe I do. Maybe that is the soft whisper from the future that touches me when I look at him. Yes, I think it is.

Colored paper and ribbon are scattered over the table. Before me is the final gift, amazingly large, sparkling with mystery and promise. I start laboriously untying the knotted ribbon. With a roll of my eyes at my two closest friends, I yank off the ribbon, rip away the paper, and open the box.

Somewhere inside me is an echo of this moment, an echo that comes from the first time, when it happened. Now I do not remember what the gift was, but I remember that it will be wonderful.

I am standing again on grey marble, light coming down from the windows above. It is an advertisement, this memory. A promise, like the gift itself. All I have to do is agree to the offer.

I shake my head.

Christmas morning, then, he says. *You were eleven. Do you remember?*

I am at our old country house, and my bedroom looks onto the sloping field where wildflowers grow in the spring. It snowed last night, but today's morning sky is clear and gloriously blue.

I put my fingertips against the cold window and watch as the glass fogs around each finger. Outside, every tree is snugly wrapped in white, and the field has become a thick white carpet that waits for nothing. Except, perhaps, my boots.

An odd sound, a muffled squeak, comes from somewhere in the house. My parents' hushed voices follow.

Warmth fills me from head to toe. It is a puppy. Asked for so many times, and finally here.

I dance across the room and dream of the games we will play together, my puppy and I, and the footprints we will leave together outside, in the snow of this perfect Christmas morning.

I am back in the domed room again.

I think of Shakti, who was my friend and companion for so many years. I see her face, I hear her bark. The memory makes me warm. I blink away tears.

All I have to do is agree.

No, I say, my mouth forming the silent word. Quickly, so that I will not change my mind.

A mirror, then, my captor says, trying a third time to tempt me.

Some long days ago my captor showed me a mirror. Understanding brushed by me like a breeze, hinting at the key to unlock my cage. Then he took the mirror away, and with it went my insight.

Even if the insight were illusion, I very much want to look in the mirror again. But I need to know how much time has passed while I slept.

How long, I ask. I try not to think of anything else. Not the gift, not Shakti, not escape.

My captor sighs in my mind, a long exhale of dark, dusty breath. Minutes pass; minutes, I am sure, because I count the seconds. I have reached three minutes and twenty seconds when the sigh finally ends.

I will tell you, he says. *But listen: these are days as your ancestors knew them, not as I know them. Not even as you know them now.*

You tell me this every time, I answer.

Yes, but I think you must not listen, because you are always dismayed when I tell you how long it has been.

Tell me.

A moment passes.

In the days of your ancestors, you have been asleep for ninety-eight thousand, seven hundred and twenty-one days.

Nearly three centuries. Even longer than last time. I feel numb shock, frustrated anger, then despair.

I look down at my hands, stomach, legs. I tell myself that this body is not mine, that I am no longer alive, that no one can live this long. The real me is dead.

He has withdrawn all but a tendril of himself from my mind. These emotions do not feed him.

No, he says, *you are not dead. You breathe and think. Sometimes you play. You are not dead.*

I look up at the windows above me, at rectangles and triangles of blue. Is it the blue of Earth's sky, of any sky, or only illusion?

Illusion? he asks as he frowns into my mind. *How easily you use that* *word. Does it mean so little to you that the food tastes good and fills your stomach?*

It is not enough that my stomach is full.

Perhaps if you were hungrier, it would be.

Hunger is something we both understand.

Perhaps, I answer.

This is also a conversation we have had before. I have already given the other answers that occur to me now, except the one he wants to hear, the one in which I accept his offer and lose myself to my best memories.

Come, he says, *today we will have many pleasures to explore. I am eager to begin.*

We have a fragile compromise; he constructs fantasies from my mind, and I tell myself that I do not live in my memories. It is a small lie, which neither of us believes. I know that it all comes from my past, whether the memory is an ice cream cone with chocolate sprinkles, or the summer night when my heart was broken into a million sharp pieces.

Why do I sleep so long? I ask.

Sleep is for rest. You have to rest.

You don't rest. Why should I?

You are different. Very delicate. If you do not rest, your—elements—will not stay together.

My elements? Do you mean my mind?

Yes, your mind. But this is not pleasure. Let us have pleasure.

Your pleasure is not my pleasure, I say.

You are wrong, he says. I taste his arrogant certainty. *I know what your pleasure is.*

You don't. I want—

I feel him shake his head at me, and my forming thought pauses. This is my invention, that he has a head to shake.

Then he waves a hand across my mind, and my thoughts are washed away, sucked down like a sand castle under a retreating surf.

You don't know what you want, he says. *The freedom for which you lust would destroy you. If you are destroyed, the pleasure goes away for both of us.*

The words bounce around in my head, like pebbles in a tin can. I struggle to remember my thoughts of a moment ago.

Waves and sand castles? I'm not sure.

Come. I hunger for your pleasure.

Your hunger, I throw back at him, making the thought hard and sharp, *is not my problem.*

My anger confuses him. For a moment he withdraws, but then he is back again, rummaging through my mind for clues. He is at once an itch and an ache. I shake my head sharply, hoping to make the feeling stop. It doesn't.

He moves deeper into me, more quickly than I can follow.

A nightmare bubbles into memory. He sees the memory, enhances it, and I cringe as it becomes real.

I look down. There is a worm crawling around on my stomach, moving just under my skin, swimming through my flesh. I am horrified. I scratch and scratch until my skin breaks open, scratch the worm away with a bit of blood. It hurts, but the worm is gone. I am relieved. Then I look down again.

There are dozens of worms, just like the first one, wriggling in circles under my skin.

The dream ends.

I am standing on marble again, shaking. There are no worms, no blood.

I clench my fists. It is all I can do.

I dreamt that dream long ago, when I was back at the Institute, studying for the trip one of us would make to Epsilon Eridani. Back then, I could wake from my nightmares. And I slept for hours, not centuries.

My captor throws me a fuzzy sphere of anticipation. The smooth, curved wall around me blurs. Now there are doors. Many doors.

Look, my captor says excitedly. *Pick one.*

All the doors look the same. I take a few steps toward one and stop. With perfect, innocent cruelty, he adds, *If you pick the right door, I will set you free.*

It might be truth, so I play the game, even knowing that my hope feeds him.

I walk forward until I reach a door. I push. It swings open.

Inside is another circular room, just like the one I am in. On the other side of that room stands a naked woman who from the back looks like me, peering through an open doorway. I turn around and there she is again, just beyond a doorway across the room, looking behind herself.

You picked the right door, he says gleefully. *You are free. Go on, go in.*

I feel a crushing pressure, which turns cold inside me. I abandon words.

I draw a picture of his face in my mind. It is my own construction, because I have never seen him. I twist the face. I pull it. I poke it. I drip foul-smelling green slime from its nose, and I rot the skin until it swells, blackens, and falls from the bones.

I feel his shock. He withdraws. I cannot keep the picture in my mind, hard as I try, and it fades. It is a minor victory, but it gives me some satisfaction, some real pleasure.

He floods back into my mind, to drink in my pleasure. He must be hungry to take this little bit.

A bee feeds at a flower, a giraffe nibbles leafy foliage, a kitten chews on a piece of tuna.

I decide not to play. One step back and the door closes. Behind me I hear a door close.

You are not happy, he says. I hear his hunger.

No.

Why not? I will give you anything.

The conversation is a daily ritual.

Let's just say we have irreconcilable differences and get a divorce, I say.

He does not understand. With access to all my memories and centuries to digest them, still he does not understand.

You are lonely, he says.

I laugh. A breathy laugh; my voice is rusty from lack of use. It tickles me that it has taken him centuries to reach this conclusion.

Don't be absurd, I say, smiling. *How could I be lonely when I have you?*

He searches my memories to understand why my words and emotions don't match. He pushes and probes. I wince and shake my head.

He goes deeper.

No, I say, *don't—*

It is morning, a fresh, bright, brittle morning. I am waking up slowly, clinging to sleep. This morning, this day, the third day since—no. I won't think it. Since—no.

I roll over in the soft bed and pull the pillow over my head. I want to sleep again, I want to sleep forever, but I am awake now, abandoned by sleep to the sharp rays of sunshine that poke at me through the lacy curtains.

For a long time I stare at nothing.

The phone rings. I don't want to answer. I do anyway.

"Kelly? It's Roxanne."

Roxanne took Simon's cats when he came to the Institute. She brought them back when the Institute decided it was okay for Simon and me to live together, even though we were both candidates.

She is part-time support staff at the Institute, but no less eager than any of us to get someone to Epsilon Eridani, to find the intelligent life that sent us a list of prime numbers nine years ago.

"Oh, God," she says to me. "I just heard. Kelly, I'm sorry."

I don't know what to say.

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Is there," she inhales, "any hope—?"

"No," I say. I've answered this one enough to make it a litany: "Massive injuries. Severed spinal chord. Brain damage. No chance."

She is silent.

I sound so clinical. That's good, I'm a scientist. My teachers at the Institute would be proud. Simon would be proud.

"The driver had a heart attack? Just like that?"

A perfect tragedy. Everyone a victim, no one to blame.

I blink. Slowly. Again. "Yes."

The Institute for Alien Studies made us into detectives. We learned to piece together a whole from any set of parts, or at least to construct plausible inferences for the data at hand. We didn't know what we would find at Epsilon Eridani, so the Institute prepared us as best they could. I was ready for anything.

Except this.

Even so, my well-trained mind ignores my emotions. I recall the police report pictures, and I see a full-color simulation in my head. I try to turn it off, but I can't.

Simon leaves the corner store with two packs of bubble gum, a pack for him, a pack for me. I don't chew the stuff, but he still buys it for me. Sometimes when he snaps his gum and blows bubbles, I think I'll have to strangle him to stay sane, but I keep my silence under the flag of love. We all have our annoying habits. I chew through pens almost as fast as he goes through gum.

Simon steps off the curb. Takes five steps across the street.

Our apartment is only a block away, but it might as well be eleven light years away. Like Epsilon Eridani.

He takes a step. Then two. Three. Another is four. Then—

The phone is a dead weight in my hand, and the sun through the curtains is hideously bright. Even now it shines, as if to say that it doesn't matter about Simon. The Earth still turns. The sun still shines.

"You must feel awful," Roxanne says.

What else would I feel? But I don't say that. She's no worse than the others. I don't blame her. I don't blame anyone.

"What if he comes out of it?" she asks timidly. "Could he?"

"He'd better not," I say. "He'd be a quadriplegic with the intelligence of a cabbage. I wish he'd died."

For a moment she is shocked into silence.

"I don't know what to say, Kelly."

I stare at the dust floating in beams of sunlight.

"Don't say anything. Just let me be. He wouldn't want this fuss. He'd want us to get back to work and get our asses to Eridani."

I have two more weeks of leave because of the accident. I decide to go back to the Institute today. Get on with the work.

"Simon was one hell of a guy, wasn't he," she says.

My throat is tight.

"Yeah."

Simon, my tormentor muses. *Is this what makes you unhappy?*

Damn you, I scream at him. *Get out of my head!*

I'm lying on the marble floor, curled up in a ball.

You are lonely for this man? he asks, slipping in and out of my mind, palpably curious, not at all discouraged by my fury. He has found a dangling thread, and he will tug on it until he unravels everything. He tugs. I brace myself.

I am standing in a long, white hallway, just a few steps from the director's office. My freedom.

Martin yells my name from the other end of the hallway. He sprints toward me.

I curse softly. Martin has found the note I left on the fridge. Too soon, which means a scene. Right here, in front of the director's office.

It isn't Martin's fault. I know what my leaving will do to him. I know he loves me. It just isn't enough.

He stops suddenly, in front of me, breathing hard.

"Kelly. Wait."

I smile, hoping against hope to keep the conversation light.

"Wish me well, Martin. I'm off into the great unknown."

"God, Kelly," he says. "I don't believe this. You were going to stay. You said—Kelly, you said you'd stay. Remember?"

"I can't," I say, looking at the Institute logo on his shirt instead of his eyes.

"Kelly—"

"This is the way it is, Martin."

I tell myself that I'm giving my life to science, which is true, but somewhere inside I know I'm also running away. I never thought I'd run away from anything. It's hard, finding out that I'm not who I thought I was.

"I did my time, Martin," I say, trying to turn it into a joke. "I've earned a little vacation."

"Damn it, Kelly, Eridani's a fucking one-way ticket!"

"Someone has to go. Might as well be me. I'll send a postcard back, tight tachyon beam. I promise."

I see his hands tremble. He looks as if he might break into tears at my next word. I feel the weight of his pain. It makes me want to leave even more. I hate this.

"So," he says bitterly. "What am I supposed to tell Simon when he wakes up?"

His words bite. I know that he must be desperate to say this, but it pisses me off. Tears trace quick lines down his face, fall from his chin. Suddenly, my anger dies. I hug him.

"Martin," I say into his ear, "the twenty of us have been hanging out here at government expense, banging away at ancient pygmies and Amazon tree bark and classical dance and basket weaving for seven years. We keep telling ourselves we're prepping for the trip to Eridani, but eventually someone has to actually *go*. Alien intelligence, Martin."

He holds me at arm's length.

"But that's not why you're going. I know how it was with you and Simon. I don't expect it to be like that with me. But God, Kelly, don't leave. He could still wake up."

His eyes are bright and full of pain.

"He won't. The doctors are just covering their fat asses by dripping sugar water into his veins. He's dead."

I kiss Martin quickly, once on each cheek and a light brush across the lips.

"Kelly—"

I shake my head to silence him.

"I had to let Simon go. Now you have to let me go."

"Kelly, goddamn it, I love you. Don't leave."

There is nothing else to say. No amount of words is going to fix what's unfixable.

"Sorry," I say, breaking my promise to myself not to use that word anymore. I mumble it again, then I pick up my bag and turn away.

I can hear Martin's breath, shallow and ragged. I hear him slam the wall with his fist.

I tell myself it will be over soon, that Martin is better off without me, that in time he will heal. I tell myself I'm doing the best I can.

In the director's office I sign my name on a lot of papers. The director shakes my hand and gives me a one-way ticket to a distant star, in a space ship that looks as much like a tin can as it does like a coffin. I can't wait to leave.

And so you left him, my alien captor says. *Are you sorry now?*

I am sitting on the ground of the domed room, looking up. I blink through tears at the bright blue in the windows. Blue that might be sky but probably isn't.

I had to come, I say. *I had to know.*

That there was intelligent life here?

That there was some reason for me to live. That I could make something count.

And have you? he asks.

Even this innocent question cannot spark my tired anger. I tell him what I've told him before.

Getting here was useless without the message I was supposed to send back.

He expresses sympathy but does not understand.

Seventeen years passed on Earth while I was in cold sleep, en route to Eridani. That's a long time for a government-sponsored program, but the Institute would keep going with the status and telemetry messages my ship sent back via nearly instantaneous tachyon beam, waiting on the real goods, the messages I would send back once I came out of cold sleep at Eridani.

Every inch of the ship was riddled with redundant systems to insure that no matter what happened at Eridani, a message would get back to Earth. But I am certain that after I reached Eridani my ship sent back not a whisper. It wasn't supposed to be possible to silence my ship, but I am sure my captor has.

Without that message back, I doubted the Institute would be able to get the government to finance another expedition.

But surely, after centuries, Earth would send another ship. Surely the call of non-Earth intelligence would draw humanity to Epsilon Eridani again. Surely. Unless—

Unless Epsilon Eridani is forgotten. Perhaps we lost star flight technology. Perhaps the Earth is dead.

It's that last thought that turns my insides to ice.

At the Institute we publicly theorized and privately prayed that the existence of non-human intelligence would give our race irresistible reasons to go into space. Once in space, we thought, humanity would survive its self-destructive tendencies.

It was a message of hope, the message I failed to send back.

I ask him now, once again: *Why?*

He hesitates. Then, like every time before, he wraps the answer into a little package. He ties it with string, and hands it to me.

I unwrap the thought bundle with exquisite care, wanting to understand this thing that has made my life worthless. But the string falls apart in my hands, and the bundle melts into air.

It is not my lack of understanding that dismays him now. He wants my pleasure, and instead has my despair.

You do not understand, he says.

You got that right. Bright little goddamned alien.

I sorrow, he says.

I am dessert that has turned bitter. Of course he sorrows.

You are lonely, he says.

I do not respond. He has found today's key, and no matter what I say, he will use it on me. Again and again, until I have no more tears. Until I have pounded my hands bloody against the marble floor. Then he will put me into a deep sleep and I will sleep for centuries.

The room's doors have faded and the walls are smooth again. A dark fog fills the room, swelling and swirling. He is creating something. I no longer wonder if what he creates around me is reality or illusion.

Look, he says, *look what I have made for you. Look and choose.*

Around me are human figures. Naked men, each one encased in an upright, plastic tomb. Like blocks of ice. Their eyes are open and unblinking.

Choose, he says. *As many as you like. All are for you.*

Ken dolls, I say.

Not dolls, he says. *They will live and breathe. I promise.*

Are any of them not *of your making?*

All, he replies, *all are of my making. For you. For your pleasure.*

I do not want them.

His disappointment is palpable.

None? he asks.

None.

He considers this.

There is one, he says. *One that is different. One that you can not have.*

I look around.

One of the many plastic tombs pulses pink. I walk to it and look at the man.

How is this one different? I ask.

He is the one you cannot have.

I know this is a game, but it is a new game, so I play.

I want this one, I say.

This one you cannot have, he repeats.

The next move is obvious. I take it anyway.

Then I want none of them.

He is suddenly gleeful.

I understand you, he says. *You only want what you cannot have.*

No, I say. *You don't understand.*

But his enthusiasm is undiminished. It is another key, and he will use it on me until it breaks or breaks me.

The forest of naked men reminds me of my own nakedness. I have been naked since I arrived. Then I assumed my captor wanted to study me that way. I was proud of myself when I arrived, proud of the anthropologist I had become, that I was not the least embarrassed.

At the Institute we pushed hard at the boundaries of cultural conditioning, so we could abandon anything that got in the way of communicating with the aliens. We ate bugs and worms, we screwed each other in public, we pissed and shit and didn't wipe. Now I have no modesty.

But I do have preferences. Looking at all these men, I remember my preferences.

Give me clothes, I say.

He pages through my memories. I see patterns, I feel textures. Suddenly I am dressed in a pale blue Institute jumpsuit.

I touch the cloth wonderingly. It feels good to be dressed. Better than I imagined. I can almost believe I am on Earth, now. In a museum, maybe, just walked in. I look around at the lifelike men, look for the plaque on the wall with the title and artist. There must be a plaque somewhere.

Which one do you want? he asks, breaking my fantasy.

I told you, I say. *The pink one.*

Only that one?

Yes.

All of the men vanish except the pink one. Then the translucent pink tomb disappears, and the man falls to his hands and knees. His chest heaves with deep, gasping breaths.

I walk to him. I touch his shoulder. The skin is warm, the muscles firm.

Very convincing, I say.

The man looks up at me. There is nothing behind his eyes. No understanding, no passion. I wonder if this body is an echo of my own, which my captor must now know down to the DNA. Illusion or reality, it doesn't matter. This thing is not of my race. I turn and walk away.

From my captor I feel a small rage. There is a sound behind me, like a large drain opening. Or a big sponge being squeezed. I look back.

There is a wet, red mound where the man knelt. Pieces of meat and organs slide slowly down the mound, which is a mass of flesh and splintered bone. Around the mound is a large, spreading pool of blood.

I am sorry for the creature's suffering, but only a little. We all suffer.

Now, my captor says, with a voice like honey-coated steel, *I will give you what you really want.*

The world slides away.

The ship has just woken me from cold sleep, which means that I'm at the planet that circles Eridani, where the alien message came from. The console beeps and the screen blinks, confirming that the computer has sent a message to Earth, saying that I've arrived.

My fingers fly over the control panel. I check the log to confirm that the computer sent humanity's Rosetta stone greeting to the planet. I shout commands and run all the analysis and test programs the computer can handle.

Minutes later I pause to glance out the viewport. The planet is tan and brown, with seas of green. I look for long moments. It is hard to look away.

When I get hungry enough, I eat a bit of my dwindling food rations. If

I eat sparingly, I have enough food for another month. That doesn't bother me. I paid for a one-way trip.

Something nags at me. Something about the ship's message back to Earth. I check the computer log to see if the message was sent. It was. Still I am anxious, so I check again, then force myself to my other tasks.

The computer beeps again. A message from Earth appears on my screen. Acknowledgment, go-ahead: try to make contact.

The grin won't come off my face now.

I still feel odd, as if I'm watching myself from a distance. It's the excitement, I tell myself. I'm about to initiate humanity's first alien contact.

Something inside me is screaming that this is wrong.

My hand is suddenly on the switch that sends a distress signal to Earth. I pull my hand back.

"What the *hell,*" I whisper, the sound of my voice loud against the close walls of the cabin.

This is not how it happened.

I reach out to touch the ship's hard metal walls. To check that they are real.

Happened?

The computer beeps. There is a reply from the planet. The computer automatically forwards the message to Earth.

I hold my breath as the computer munches on the alien message, turns it inside-out a thousand times and then spits out a preliminary translation:

"Greetings come friends union good happy."

I howl my victory cry. I can see them all at the Institute, their ecstatic grins. Even Simon smiles, from his place inside me. A new universe has just been born, right in front of me, a universe in which humanity is not alone.

Still I feel there is something wrong. What?

I curse, angry at having this moment spoiled. Everything hoped for and more, a successful mission, a diamond bright opportunity. Much better than the first time.

The first time?

The warning bell in my head is clanging. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and try to track the cause. Like a dim star, it vanishes when I look at it, so I look to one side.

Then I remember that other time. The first time.

This is not the way it happened, I tell my captor. *You're editing my memories.*

The computer beeps. I open my eyes. On the screen is another message from the aliens. They have sent us their Rosetta stone. The computer transmits the message back to Earth as it starts to digest the alien key.

I make a fist. I bring it down on the ship's console. The console beeps a protest.

No. This is not the way it happened. I will not be lied to. I will not have my memories changed.

I dig deep through my mind, down past my hopes of what might have been.

And there it is. The hard truth. What really happened.

I receive nothing from Earth or the planet. Hours pass, then days. I send my arrival message to Earth in a constant, repeating stream. I check every part of the ship's communication system, then all the hardware. I find no malfunction.

Five days later Earth has still not responded. I have performed every system check hundreds of times. I have barely eaten or slept.

Suddenly the ship's controls stop responding. I watch helplessly while the ship plunges through the planet's atmosphere and begins to land.

Again I try to warn Earth. The ship does not respond to any of my commands. In my sleepless, hungered state, I imagine that the aliens are monsters who crave humanity's destruction. I consider initiating the ship's self-destruct. I decide not to. I lose consciousness.

When I awake, I am in a large, domed room, with many high windows. An alien walks through my mind, trying to understand my thoughts and pleasures. He has had much time to understand me.

I am not deceived, I tell him now. *Not at all.*

The ship vanishes. I am again standing on marble.

Why do you scorn your own pleasure? he asks irritably. *I give you the past you want, and you reject it.*

I reject falsehood.

He is frustrated, and he spins in my mind, a red glow. *Must your truth always be painful? Can you not allow yourself even a little pleasure?*

Not at the cost of what is true. You took everything else.

He considers this.

You are tired, he concludes.

Yes.

You want to sleep, he says.

We have come to the end of the day again. Perhaps I cannot die, but I can sleep.

Yes.

But I have not had enough of your pleasure. First give me that.

There it is, the deal. I will escape to my slumbers only after I have given him what he craves. I, the unwilling drug, bargaining with my captor for a door into temporary oblivion.

I don't want to do this. I almost remember the last time.

All right, I say reluctantly.

I promise myself that this time I will only enjoy it a little. I will not forget who I am. I tell myself that it is only for a few minutes, and only so I can sleep. I tell myself a lot of things.

He floods me.

Everything is bright.

I reach out long arms. I play in the soft clouds and green seas. The stars call to me, begging me to come join in their dance. I accept, and they fill the air around me, like fireflies, swirling and circling, becoming my halo.

I look down and laugh kindly at my mortal self, at the delightful, foolish fears I had moments ago. I am a goddess now, so I bestow my blessings upon my lesser self. I give her promises, sprinkled like fairy dust, of the wondrous things that are yet to be.

Now I see many kinds of truth. The truths mingle and frolic and twist, creating new worlds every moment. They parade like strings of diamonds. Bright as suns, deep as space.

This is what I saw in the mirror. My freedom. I could wave my hand and free my lesser, mortal self. But now I am distracted by other things that beckon with the promise of even more fantastic understandings. I fly among the promises.

I dance. I cry. I sing. I delight.

I am a rose petal, stolen from a flower by the breeze. I float slowly to the ground. Death this is, of a sort, but I understand it now; it is but one of many deaths. A truth, but one of many truths.

I embrace the fall. I open my eyes.

My captor sighs contentedly in my mind. He gives me a sleepy smile, like a man after ejaculation. A door appears in the smooth, curved wall before me. The door to sleep. My payment.

The changes he made to my body chemistry now take their due. Just as the euphoria is hard to remember after it is over, so, too, is the depression that follows. But as it comes over me, I clearly remember the last time. I sit on the hard floor. I hug my knees to my chest.

Everything I knew moments ago is gone. The words remain, but the meanings are dust. Truth and stars and freedom—what do I have to show for these words? Before, at least, I had self-respect.

I tell myself that I will not let him do this to me again, no matter how much I want to sleep, no matter how bad I feel. I say it again and again, until I almost believe it.

I put a hand flat on the cool marble, clinging to the simple truth that I am not the floor. The world turns dark around me. I am dizzy and my stomach clenches. I know it is a reaction to the changes he made in me, that it will pass, but that doesn't help.

I want to sleep. A long, dreamless sleep.

I try to stand, to get to the door, but I am too weak.

The door opens. A man walks in. He has long, dark hair and a beard. The beard, I note with odd detachment, is new. He looks around the room, sees me. His eyes widen a little, then narrow. I'm in no condition for this game.

Let me sleep, I say to my captor. *You promised.*

He has been asleep a long time, my captor says. *Now he is awake.*

I close my eyes and hug my legs to my chest.

"Kelly?"

His voice is familiar, yet it sounds odd here. I have not heard any voice in this room for—centuries. As he walks toward me, even his steps bring back the past. I open my eyes. He is on one knee, a hand on my shoulder.

"Kelly," he says, his green eyes on mine. "God, woman, is that really you?"

He's wearing the same kind of lightweight jumpsuit I have on. Every movement he makes seems real, true. My captor could not have shown him more perfectly.

"No," I try to say, but I have not spoken for so long that it comes out a whisper.

He stares at me, uncertain, then suspicious. He stands.

"Kelly," he says sharply, his voice slamming into my ears. When a buzzing alarm clock could not wake me, Simon could.

"You aren't real," I whisper. "You're dead. Go away."

He stands and nods. A quick nod, like he used to when we were studying together at the Institute. I know his expressions; he's remembering. He shakes his head. Just like he used to. It's very convincing.

My life's work to uncover the truth, all gone in a moment, if I let myself believe this.

Nice try, I say to my captor. *Nice try, but it doesn't fly. You still want to play games? We'll play games. But get rid of the puppet.*

The puppet looks at me.

"You thought I was dead," it says, "Now I'm here. You're not sure it's really me. Is that right?"

I can't take my eyes off him.

"Remember Kramer's metaphysics class at the Institute," he says. "What proof would convince you that I exist?"

It is exactly what Simon would say. I am fighting my own memories. I decide to grill him. Find something that isn't Simon. Memories aren't simple; if you push hard enough, you'll find a contradiction, a crack.

Somewhere an alien, pulling strings. I struggle to my feet.

"Doesn't it occur to you," I ask the puppet, my voice unsteady, "to wonder where the hell you are?"

"Yeah," the puppet says. "Give me a hint. My ship's controls stopped responding when I reached Eridani."

"You're dead," I say.

"I see. Then this must be heaven."

I blink. I didn't expect him to say that. Is it a crack, or something Simon might say?

"Not hot enough to be hell," he adds.

It's a joke, but there's tension in his deadpan delivery. He's holding fast to what he knows, relying on the verifiable. It's just what I would do in his place.

Damn.

"This," I turn my hands out to include the room. "And you. Everything. The alien made it all. You remember the alien, don't you?"

"You bet your sweet ass," he says with sudden passion. "Where are they?"

"I've only met one."

"I hope it's small, fuzzy and cute. Are you going to introduce me?"

I smile. A hard, brittle smile and a bitter victory. Simon wouldn't say that, not here, not now. My captor is using the memories I have of the Simon who was my lover. Not the Simon who was always, first, a scientist.

You lose, I tell my captor.

Perhaps, the alien says, admitting nothing.

I decide not to play. I walk around the puppet, toward the door to sleep.

The puppet grabs me and yanks me around to face him, his hands gripping my shoulders.

"Talk to me, Kelly. What happened? Where are we?"

I am stunned at this, but it is good, very good, because this physical act, too, is something that Simon would never have done.

"Simon died," I say. "Centuries ago."

"Centuries?" The puppet frowns. "How do you figure centuries?"

I shrug. After a moment, the puppet shakes me.

"How long since you arrived?" it asks.

The real Simon would ask this. We were like that; we had to know where, how long, and how much. The question is so reasonable that I answer.

"Ten days," I say. "But each night lasts centuries. I estimate the total at about two thousand years."

He blinks; a blink of disbelief. But he's reserving judgment. Collecting data. Just like a scientist.

"If my source is reliable," I add.

"What's your source?"

"The alien."

"The alien," he repeats, his tone flat.

I can smell him now. He smells like Simon did.

Damn, I'm falling.

I try to give my voice authority. "Simon got beat up by a car. On Earth. Now he's dead."

His green eyes stare deep into mine.

"Unless he came out of his coma and followed you here."

"Not possible."

"Not possible?" He spits the last word. "Since when? Since you left? Science goes on without you, sweetheart. They dumped me in cold sleep. Pulled me out when they had experimental nerve regeneration. Experimental and *successful.* Recovery was a bitch, of course, and then you were gone. Getting approval for another ship after yours vanished—"

He looks away, lips tight.

"Why didn't you send a message back?" he asks.

I try to pull away. He grips tighter. It hurts.

"The meds," he says, still looking away, "were not excited about letting their successful regeneration case walk out the door. Rather less excited about giving me a starship. I had to be very convincing. Convincing enough that I'll be shot if I ever return to Earth." Now he looks at me. "But I had to come. I had to know what happened."

His face contorts in fury. Not Simon, I tell myself. He grips me tighter. Shakes me again.

"To you," he says. "Why the *hell* didn't you send back?"

"I *tried,* damn it," I snap at him. "My controls froze, too. But to hell with you. Simon is dead."

He grips my shoulders so hard that I cry out. All at once he lets go.

"You have to trust your own analysis," he says, turning away, "just as I have to trust mine."

I tell myself again that this cannot be Simon, but in my heart the seeds of doubt are questing for light.

He walks to the wall and touches it, looking up and down, trying to understand how the room is put together. I did this when I arrived, too. Does he do this because we are alike, or because the alien makes the puppet mimic me? I stand, frozen in uncertainty.

In my head, my captor speaks.

Is this not what you want?

No, I say. *I want the real Simon, not a puppet from my memories.*

But you do not seem to be able to tell the difference.

Simon is dead.

But, he says, *you are not sure.*

No, damn you.

If this man does not please you, I will remove him.

I think of the pile of blood and bones.

No, I say quickly.

Then shall I let him grow old and die, while you sleep? Will that make you happy?

He walks around the room, looking up at the windows.

Simon. The only man who could track me across a landscape of passion and reason and not stumble.

He turns to look at me, and now there are tears in my eyes. Inside me the roots of doubt are very deep. But to believe is to surrender.

I fear that I already believe.

Is he real? I ask the alien.

I know that I can trust no answer the alien gives, and still I ask. This is my surrender.

He is real, my alien captor answers.

And now there is no turning back.

Simon walks to me. I reach for him. His touch on my skin is so gentle that I crumble inside. We hold each other tightly, hungrily. We hold each other, and I rock him with my sobs. He says my name, again and again. His voice breaks, but he does not stop. He kisses me, strokes my cheek, takes away my tears. My fingers tremble as I trace the lines of his chin.

No, I say to my captor, *don't take him away. He gives me—pleasure.*

He is yours, my captor says, smiling. It is a long, deep, satisfied smile. It might be the smile of a victor. I don't care.

Simon entwines my fingers in his own.

"You want to meet the alien?" I ask Simon. I nod at the door, behind which might be my bed, the alien, anything. "Through there."

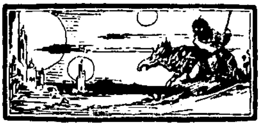
Simon frowns. He thinks this is the same door he came in, the one that leads to his ship.

I should tell him that the alien can manipulate thoughts and objects with equal ease. I should tell him all that's happened to me these centuries.

I should tell him that he can never again be certain.

But there will be time later. More than enough. And I cannot bear to part with the joy of this moment.

We walk to the door. I push it open with my free hand, my other tightly holding his. Together we walk through. ●



FRANKENSTEIN'S ODE TO HIS BRIDE

Why do you turn away
when I spread my arms
to accept you in my crushing embrace?

Am I so ugly
that your scream makes
the skeletons in the dungeon stir,
and sears my Soul to its deepest core?

Come, and we will dance
the Waltz of the Flowers through
the mists of the graveyard,
sing lullabyes to one another
from the castle walls
and make love during
a lightning storm.

We can ride the currents of night,
with the Moon as our Sun,
and gaze down from our mountain
upon the civilizations of Man.

Please don't leave—
the stone walls and dusty corridors
are cold companions
for one who has been
brought back from peaceful rest
and cursed with eternal life.

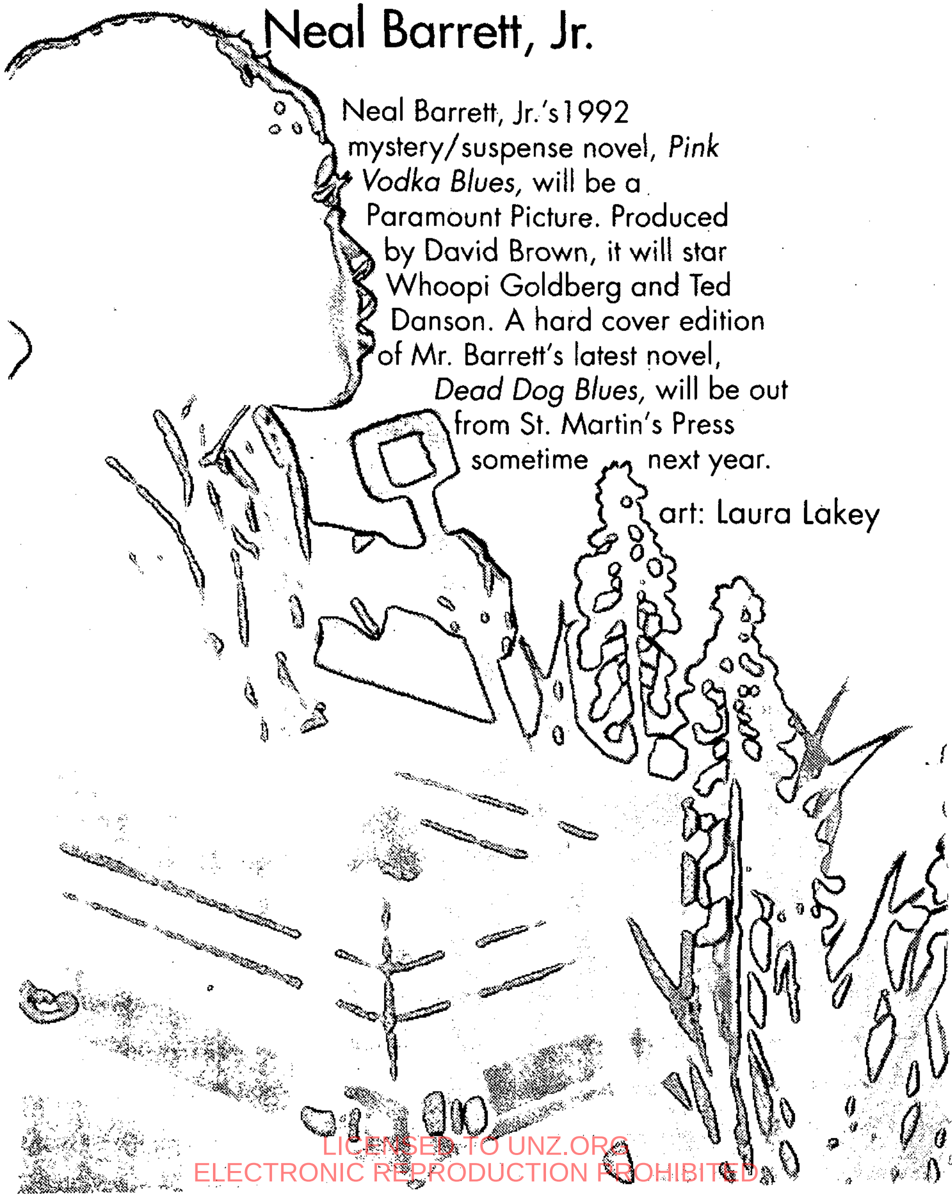
—Scott L. Towner

CUSH

Neal Barrett, Jr.

Neal Barrett, Jr.'s 1992 mystery/suspense novel, *Pink Vodka Blues*, will be a Paramount Picture. Produced by David Brown, it will star Whoopi Goldberg and Ted Danson. A hard cover edition of Mr. Barrett's latest novel, *Dead Dog Blues*, will be out from St. Martin's Press sometime next year.

art: Laura Lakey



The cars started coming in the early hot locust afternoon, turning off the highway and onto the powder-dry road, cars from towns with names like Six Mile and Santuck and Wedowee and Hawk, small-print names like Uchee and Landerville and Sprott, cars from big cities like Birmingham and Mobile and even out of state, all winding down the narrow choked-up road, leaving plumes of red dust for the other cars behind, down through the midsummer August afternoon into deep green shade under sweetgum and sycamore and pine.

The cars hesitated when they came to the bridge. The rust-iron, bolt-studded sides looked strong enough to hold the pyramids, but the surface of the bridge caused some alarm. The flat wooden timbers were weathered gray as stone, sagged and bent and bowed and warped every way but straight. Every time a car got across, the bridge gave a clatter-hollow death-rattle roll like God had made a center-lane strike. Reason said that the Buick up ahead had made it fine. Caution said this was a time to reflect on mortal life. One major funeral a day was quite enough. The best way to view these events was standing up.

Aunt Alma Cree didn't give two hoots about the bridge. She stopped in the middle of the span, killed the engine, and rolled the window down. There was nobody coming up behind. If they did, why they could wait. If they didn't want to wait, they could honk and stomp around, which wouldn't bother Alma Cree a bit. Alma had stood on the steps of Central High in Little Rock in '56, looking up at grim white soldiers tall as trees. Nine years later, she'd joined the march from Selma to Montgomery with Martin Luther King. Nothing much had disturbed her ever since. Not losing a husband who was only thirty-two. Not forty-three years teaching kids who were more concerned with street biology than reading *Moby Dick*.

She *sure* wasn't worried about a *bridge*. Least of all the one beneath her now. She knew this bridge like she knew her private parts. She knew that it was built around 1922 by a white man from Jackson who used to own the land. He didn't like to farm, but he liked to get away from his wife. Alma's grandfather bought the place cheap in '36, and the family had lived there ever since. The timber on the bridge had washed away seven times, but the iron had always held. The creek had claimed a John Deere tractor, a Chevy, and a '39 LaSalle. Alma knew all about the bridge.

She remembered how she and her sister Lucy used to sneak off from the house, climb up the railing, and lean out far enough to spit. They'd spit and then wait, wait for the red-fin minnows and silver baby perch to come to lunch. They never seemed to guess it wasn't something good to eat. Alma and Lucy would laugh until their sides nearly split, because spit fooled the fish every time. Didn't nobody have less sense, Mama said, than two stringy-legged nigger gals who couldn't hardly dry a dish. But Alma and Lucy didn't care. They might be dumb, but they didn't think spit was a fat green hopper or a fly.

Alma sat and smelled the rich hot scent of creek decay. She listened to the lazy day chirring in the trees, the only sound in the silent afternoon. The bottom lay heat-dazed and drugged, tangled in heavy brush and vine. The water down below was still and deep, the surface was congealed and poison green. If you spit in the water now it wouldn't sink. The minnows and the perch had disappeared. Farther up a ways, someone told Alma a year or two before, there was still good water, still cottonmouth heaven up there, and you could see a hundred turtles at a time, sleeping like green clots of moss on a log.

But not down here, Alma thought. Everything here is mostly dead. She remembered picking pinks and puttyroot beside the creek, lady fern and toadshade in the woods. Now all that was gone, and the field by the house was choked with catbrier and nettle, and honeylocust sharp with bristle-thorns. The homeplace itself had passed the urge to creak and sigh. Every plank and nail had settled in and sagged as far as it could go. The house had been built in a grove of tall pecans, thick-boled giants that had shaded fifty years of Sunday picnic afternoons. The house had outlived every tree, and now they were gone too. A few chinaberries grew around the back porch, but you can't hang a swing on a ratty little tree.

"One day, that house is going to fall," Alma said, in the quiet of the hot afternoon. One day it's going to see that the creek and the land are bone dry and Mr. Death has nearly picked the place clean. Driving up from the creek on the red-dust road, she could feel the ghosts everywhere about. Grandpas and uncles and cousins twice removed, and a whole multitude of great aunts. Papa and Mama long gone, and sister Lucy gone too. No one in the big hollow house except Lucy's girl Pru. Pru and the baby and Uncle John Fry, dead at a hundred and three. Dead and laid out in the parlor in a box.

Lord God, Alma thought, the whole family's come to this. A dead old man and crazy Pru, who's tried to swallow lye twice. John Ezekiel Fry and Pru, and a one-eyed patchwork child, conceived in mortal sin.

"And don't forget yourself," she said aloud. "*You* aren't any great prize, Alma Cree."

They couldn't all get in the parlor, but as many came in as they could, the rest trailing out in the hall and through the door and down the porch, crowding in a knot in the heat outside. The window to the parlor was raised up high, so everyone could hear the preacher's message fairly clear.

Immediate family to the front, is what Preacher Will said, so Alma had to sit in a straight-back chair by her crazy niece Pru. Pru to her left, a cousin named Edgar to her right, a man she had never laid eyes on in her life.

Where did they all come from? she thought, looking at the unfamiliar faces all about. Forty, maybe fifty people, driving in from everywhere, and not any three she could recall. Had she known them in the summer as a child, had they come to Thanksgiving some time? They were here, so they must be kin to Uncle Fry.

It was hot as an oven outside the house and in. Before the service got fully underway, a stout lady fainted in the hall. And, as a great ocean liner draws everything near it down into the unforgiving sea, Mrs. Andrea Simms of Mobile pulled several people with her out of sight. Outside, an asp dropped from a chinaberry tree down the collar of an insurance man from Tullahoma, Tennessee. Cries went out for baking soda, but Pru had little more than lye and peanut butter in the house, so the family had to flee.

Preacher Will extolled the virtues of John Ezekiel Fry, noting that he had lived a long life, which anyone there could plainly see. Will himself was eighty-three, and he was certain Uncle Fry had never been inside his church at any time. Still, you had to say *some*thing, so Will filled in with Bible verse to make the service last. He knew the entire Old Testament and the New, everything but Titus and part of Malachi, enough to talk on through the summer and the fall, and somewhere into June.

Alma felt inertia settling in. Her face was flushed with heat, and all her lower parts were paralyzed. Pru was swaying back and forth, humming a Michael Jackson tune. Cousin Edgar was dead or fast asleep. Not any of us going to last long, Alma thought, and Will isn't even into Psalms.

The Lord was listening in, or some northern saint who was mindful of the heat. At that very moment, the service came abruptly to a halt. A terrible cry swept through the house, ripped through every empty hall and dusty room, through every mousehole and weather crack, through every wall and floor. No one who heard the cry forgot. The sound was so lonely, so full of hurt and woe, so full of pain and sorrow and regret, a cry and a wail for all the grief and the misery the world had ever known, all the suffering and sin, all gathered in a single long lament.

Crazy Pru was up and on her feet, the moment the sound began, Crazy Pru with her eyes full of fright, with a mother's primal terror in her heart.

"Oh Lord God," she cried, "oh sweet Jesus, somethin's happened to my child! Somethin's wrong with little Cush!"

Pru tore through the crowd, fought to reach the hall, Aunt Alma right behind. The people gave way, parting as they came, then trailed right up the stairs, leaving Uncle John Ezekiel Fry all alone with a row of empty chairs, alone except for Leonard T. Pyne.

When Pru saw her child, she went berserk. She shrieked and pulled her hair, whirled in a jerky little dance, moaned and screamed and gagged, and collapsed in an overstuffed chair. Aunt Alma looked into the crib and thought her heart would surely stop. The child was bleeding from its single awful eye, bleeding from its mouth and from its nose, bleeding from its fingers and its toes, bleeding from its ears and from every tiny pore.

Alma didn't stop to think. She lifted up the child, this ugly little kicking screaming pinto-colored child with its possum arms and legs and its baked potato head, lifted up the child and shouted, "Get the *hell* out of my way, I'm coming through!"

Alma ran out of the room and down the hall, the child slick and wet and pulsing like a fancy shower spray. In the bathroom, she laid Cush quickly in the tub and turned the faucet on full. She splashed the child and slapped it, held it right beneath the rushing tap. The red washed away, but Alma didn't care about that. She prayed that the shock would trigger something vital inside and make the bleeding go away.

The child howled until Alma thought her ears would surely burst. It fought to get free from the water streaming down upon its head, it twisted like an eel in her hands, but she knew that she couldn't let it get away.

And then the bleeding stopped. Just like that. Cush stopped crying and the color in the tub went from red to pink to clear, and Alma lifted up the child, and someone handed her a towel.

"There now," Alma said, "you're going to be all right, you're going to be just fine."

She knew this was a lie. You couldn't look at this poor little thing with its one eye open, and one forever shut, and say everything'll be just fine. There wasn't anything fine about Cush. There wasn't now and there wouldn't ever be.

At the very same moment the child stopped bleeding upstairs, Uncle John Ezekiel Fry, dead at a hundred and three, farted in his coffin, shook, and gave a satisfying sigh. In the time it takes a fly to bat its wings, Fry remembered every single instant of his life, every word and past event, every second since May 24 in 1888, things that had touched him, and things that he didn't understand, things that he had paid no attention to at all. He remembered the Oklahoma Run and the Panic of '93. He remembered getting knifed when he was barely twenty-two. He remembered Max Planck. The Sherman Silver Purchase Act. Twenty-one-thousand, four-hundred-sixty-two catfish he'd eaten in his life. A truckload of Delaware Punch. Sixteen tank cars of whiskey and gin. Seven tons of pork. John Maynard Keynes. Teddy up San Juan Hill. Iwo Jima and Ypres. Tiger tanks and Spads. A golden-skinned whore named Caroline. Wilson got four hundred and thirty-five electoral votes, and Taft got only eight. The St. Louis Fair in 1904. Cornbread and beans. A girl in a red silk dress in Tupelo. Shooting a man in Mobile and stealing his silver watch. A lady in Atlanta under a lemon moon, wet from the river, diamond droplets on her skin, and coal-black moss between her thighs.

All this came to Uncle John Ezekiel Fry as he gripped the wooden sides of his box and sat up and blinked his eyes, sat and blinked his eyes and said, "*Whiskey-tit-February-cunt . . . Lindy sweet as blackberry pie . . .*"

There was no one in the room except Leonard T. Pyne. Walking hurt a lot, so he hadn't chased the crowd upstairs. He stared at John Fry, saw his hands on the box, saw a suit that looked empty inside, saw a face like an apple that's been rotting in the bin for some time. Saw tarball eyes that looked in instead of out, looked at things Leonard hoped to God he'd never see.

Leonard didn't faint and didn't scream. His hair didn't stand on end. He didn't do anything you'd think he ought to do, because he didn't for a minute believe a thing he saw. Dead men don't sit up and talk, he knew that. And if they don't, you wouldn't see them do it, so why make a fuss about that?

Leonard T. Pyne got up and walked out. He forgot he had knees near the size of basketballs. He forgot he couldn't walk without a crutch. He walked out and got into his car and drove away. He forgot he'd brought his wife Lucille. He drove back up the dirt road, across the bridge, and headed straight for New Orleans. He'd lived all his life south of Knoxville, Tennessee. He'd never gone to New Orleans, and couldn't think of any reason why he should.

When the folks came down from upstairs, Uncle John Ezekiel Fry was in the kitchen, pulling open cabinets and drawers, looking for a drink. Some people fell down and prayed. Some passed out, but that could have been the heat. People who'd come from out of state said it's just like Fry to pull a stunt like this, he never gave a shit about anyone else. The next time he died, they weren't about to make the trip.

Crazy Pru, when she gathered up her wits, when the baby looked fine, or as fine as a child like that could ever be, said God worked in wondrous ways, anyone could plainly see. What if she hadn't been broke, and they'd gone and had Uncle Fry embalmed instead of laid out in a box? He'd have been dead sure, and wouldn't have a chance of waking up and coming back.

The town undertaker, Marvin Doone, could feel Preacher Will's accusing eyes, and he couldn't think of anything to say. Will had felt sorry for the family, and slipped Doone the cash to do the body up right. Which Marvin Doone had *done,* sucking out all of Uncle Fry's insides, pumping fluids in and sewing everything up, dressing the remains in a black Sears suit, also courtesy of Will. There wasn't any question in Marvin Doone's mind that Fry had absolutely no vital parts, and how could he explain *that* to Will?

Preacher Will never spoke to Doone again.

Doone went home and drank half a quart of gin.

Uncle John Ezekiel Fry said, "*Nipple-pussy-Mississippi-rye,*" or words to that effect, walked eight miles back to his own farm, where he ate a whole onion and fried himself some fish.

"Pru, you ought to sell this place and get you and the child into town," Alma said. "There isn't anything left here for you, there's not a reason in the world for you to stay."

"Place is all paid for," said Pru. "Place belongs to me."

They were sitting on the porch, watching the evening slide away, watching the dark crowd in along the creek, watching an owl dart low among the trees. Pru rocked the baby in her arms, and the baby looked content. It played with its little possum hands, it watched Aunt Alma with its black and sleepy eye.

"Paid for's one thing," Alma said. "Keeping up is something else. There's taxes on land, and somebody's got to pay for that. The place won't grow anything, the soil's dead. Near as I can tell, stinging nettle's not a cash crop."

Pru smiled and tickled the baby's chin, though Alma couldn't see that it had a chin at all.

"Me and Cush, we be just fine," Pru said. "We goin' to make it just fine."

Alma looked straight out in the dark. "Prudence, it's not my place to say it, but I will. Your mother was my sister and I guess I got the right. That is *not* a proper name for a child. I'm sorry, but it simply is not."

"Cush, that's my baby's name," Pru said.

"It's not right," Alma said.

Pru rocked back and forth, bare feet brushing light against the porch. "Noah woke," Pru said, "and he know his son Ham seen him naked in his tent. An' Noah say, 'I'm cursin' all your children, Ham, that's what I'm goin' to do. And lo, that's what he did. An' one of Ham's sons was called Cush.' "

"I don't care if he was or not," Alma said. "You want a Bible name, there's lots of names to choose, it doesn't have to be Cush."

Pru gave Alma a disconcerting look. The look said maybe-I'm-present-but-I-might-have-stepped-out.

"Lots of names, all right," Pru said, "but not too many got a *curse*. I figure Cush here, he oughta have a name with a curse."

Alma wasn't certain how she ought to answer that.

Alma found retirement a bore, just like she'd figured that she would. Her name was on the list for substitutes, but the calls that came were few and far between. She worked part-time for the Montgomery NAACP, taking calls and typing and doing what she could. She grubbed in the garden sometimes, and painted the outside of the house. She had thought for some time about a lavender house. The neighbors didn't take to this at all, but Alma didn't care. I might be into hot pink next year, she told Mrs. Sissy Hayes across the street. What do you think about *that?*

She hadn't been feeling too well since fall the year before. Getting tired too soon, and even taking afternoon naps. Something that she'd never done before. Painting the house wore her out, more than she cared to admit. I'm hardly even past sixty-five, she told herself. I'm a little worse for wear, but I'm not about to stop.

What she thought she ought to do was drop by Dr. Frank's and have a talk. Not a real appointment, just a talk. Stop by and talk about iron, maybe get a shot of B.

Dr. Frank gave her seventeen tests and said you'd better straighten out, Alma Cree. You're diabetic and you've got a bad heart. You're maybe into gout. I'm not sure your kidneys are the way they ought to be.

Alma drove home and made herself some tea. Then she sat down at the table and cried. She hadn't cried since Lucy passed away, and couldn't say when before that.

"Oh Jesus," Alma said aloud, the kitchen sun blurring through her tears. "I don't want to get old, and I sure don't want to die. But old's my first choice, I think you ought to know that."

Her body seemed to sense Alma knew she'd been betrayed. There were no more occasional aches and pains, no more little hints. The hurt came out in force with clear purpose and intent.

The pills and shots seemed to help, but not enough. Alma didn't like her new self. She'd never been sick and she didn't like being sick now. She had to quit the part-time job. Working in the garden hurt her knees. Standing up hurt her legs and sitting down hurt everything else. What I ought to do, Alma said, is take to drink. It seems to work for everyone else.

All this occurred after Uncle Fry's abortive skirt with death, and her trip down to the farm. In spite of her own new problems, Alma tried to keep in touch with Pru. She wrote now and then, but Pru never wrote back. Alma sent a little money when she could. Pru never said thanks, which didn't surprise Alma a bit. Pru's mother Lucy, rest her soul, had always been tight with a dollar, even when she wasn't dirt poor. Maybe cheap runs in Pru's blood, Alma thought. God knows everything *else* peculiar does. Lucy flat cheap, and her husband a mean-eyed drunk. No one knew who had fathered Pru's child, least of all Pru. Whoever he was, he couldn't account for Cush. Only God could take the blame for a child like Cush. Heredity was one thing, but that poor thing was something else. There weren't enough bad genes in Alabama to gang up and come out with a Cush.

Alma felt she had to see Pru. She was feeling some better, and Dr. Frank said the trip would do her good. She had meant to come before, but didn't feel up to the drive. In her letters to Pru, she had mentioned that she wasn't feeling well, and let it go at that. Not that Pru likely cared—Alma wouldn't know her niece was still alive if it wasn't for Preacher Will. Will wrote every six months, the same two lines that said Pru and the child were just fine. Alma doubted that. How could they be just fine? How were they eating, how were they getting by? It had been nearly—what? Lord, close to three years. That would make Cush about four. Who would have guessed the child would live as long as that?

As ever, Alma felt a tug from the past as she drove off the highway and onto the red dirt road. She was pleased and surprised to see the land looking fine, much better than it had the time before. The water at the creek was much higher, and running nearly clear. Wildflowers pushed up through the weeds and vines. As she watched the dark water, as she tried to peer down into the deep, a thin shaft of light made its way through the thick green branches up above, dropping silver coins in the shallows by the bank. Alma saw a sudden dart of color, quick crimson sparks against the citron-yellow light.

"Will you just look at that!" she said, and nearly laughed aloud. "Redfin minnows coming back. I'll bet you all still fool enough to eat spit!"

If her back wasn't giving her a fit, if she hadn't stiffened up from the drive, Alma would have hopped out and given spit a try. Instead, she drove through the trees and back out into the sun, up the last hill through the field and to the house.

For a moment, Alma thought that she'd gotten mixed up somehow and turned off on the wrong road. The catbrier and nettles were gone. The field was full of tall green corn. Closer to the house, the corn gave way to neat rows of cabbages, okra and tomatoes, squash and lima beans. The house was freshly painted white. All the windows had glossy black trim and new screens. A brick walk led up to the porch, and perched on the new gravel drive was a blue Ford pickup with oversize tires.

Alma felt a sudden sense of hopelessness and fear. Pru's gone, she thought. She's gone, and someone else is living here. She's gone, and there isn't any telling where that crazy girl went.

Alma parked behind the pickup truck. There wasn't any use in going in. Maybe someone would come out. She rolled the window down. A hot summer breeze dissolved the colder air at once. Alma thought about honking. Not a big honk, not something impolite, just a quick little tap. She waited just a moment, just a small moment more. Then something in the field caught her eye, and she turned and heard the rattle of the corn, looked and saw the green stalks part and saw the scarecrow jerk-step-jiggle down the rows, saw the denim overalls faded white hanging limp on the snap-dry arms, saw the brittle-stick legs, saw the mouse-nibble gray felt hat, stratified with prehistoric sweat, saw the face like a brown paper sack creased and folded thin as dust, saw the grease-spot eyes and the paper-rip mouth, saw this dizzy apparition held together now and then with bits of rag and cotton string.

"Why, Uncle John Ezekiel Fry," Alma said, "it's nice to find you looking so spry. Think the corn'll do good this year?"

"Crowbar-Chattahoochee-suck," said Uncle Fry. *"Cling peach-sourdough-crotch . . ."*

"Lord God," Alma said. She watched Uncle Fry walk back into the corn. Either Uncle John Fry or a gnat got in her eye, either John Ezekiel Fry or a phantom cloud of lint. If *he's* still here, Alma thought, then Pru's around, too, though something's going on that isn't right.

At that very moment, Alma heard the screendoor slam and saw Pru running barefoot down the steps—Pru, or someone who looked a whole lot like Pru, if Pru filled out and wasn't skinny as a rail, if she looked like Whitney what's-her-name. If she did her hair nice and bought a pretty pink dress and didn't look real goofy in the eyes. If all that occurred, and it seemed as if it had, then this was maybe Lucy's only daughter Prudence Jean.

"Aunt Alma, sakes alive," Pru said, "my, if this ain't a nice surprise!"

Before Aunt Alma could drag her aches and pains upright, Pru was at the car, laughing and grinning and hugging her to death.

"Say, you look fine," said Pru. "You look just as fine as you can be."

"I'm not fine at all, I've been sick," Alma said.

"Well, you sure look good to me," Pru said.

"It wouldn't hurt you much to write."

"Me and the alphabet never got along too good," said Pru. "But I sure think about you all the time."

Alma had her doubts about that. Pru led her up the brick walk across the porch and in the house. Once more, Alma felt alarmed, felt slightly out of synch, felt as if she'd found the wrong place, felt as if she might be out of state. A big unit hummed in the window and the air was icy cold. The wood floor was covered with a blue-flowered rug. There were pictures on the walls. A new lamp, a new couch, and new chairs.

"Pru," Alma said, "you want to tell me what's going on around here? I mean, everything sure looks nice, it looks fine. . . ."

"I bet you're hot," Pru said. "You just sit and I'll get some lemonade."

I'm not hot now, Alma thought. Isn't anybody hot, you got the air turned down to thirty-two. She could hear Pru humming down the hall. Probably got a brand new designer kitchen, too. A fridge and a stove colored everything but white.

Lord Jesus, the place painted up, a new truck and new screens and a house full of Sears! No wonder Preacher Will never said a whole lot.

Alma didn't want to think where the money came from, Pru looking slick as a fashion magazine, all her best parts pooching in or swelling out. What's a person going to think? A girl doesn't know her alphabet past *D,* she isn't working down at Merrill-Lynch. What she's *working* is a Mobile dandy with a mouth full of coke-white teeth and a Cadillac to match.

It's not right, Alma thought. Looks like it pays pretty good, but it's not the thing a girl ought to do. That's what I'll say, I'll say, Pru, I know you've had a real bad time with Cush and all, but it's not the thing to do.

Pru brought the lemonade back, sat down and smiled like the ladies do in *Vogue* when they're selling good perfume.

"Aunt Alma," she said, "I bet you want to hear 'bout all this stuff I got around. I got an idea you maybe would."

Alma cleared her throat. "Well, if you feel like you *want* to tell me, Pru, that's fine."

"I sorta had good fortune come my way," Pru said. "I was workin' in the corn one day when my hoe hit somethin' hard. I dug it up and found a rusty tin can. Inside the can was a little leather sack. And inside *that,* praise God, was nine twenty-dollar gold coins lookin' fresh as they could be. I took 'em to the bank and Mr. Deek say, nine times twenty, Miz Pru, that's a hundred and eighty dollahs, but I'll give you two hundred on the spot. An' I say I don't guess you will, Mr. Deek, I said I ain't near as touched as I maybe used to be. I said I seen a program 'bout coins on the public TV.

"So what I *did,* I took a bus down to Mobile an' found an ol' man cookin' fish. I say, can you read and write? He says he can, pretty good, and I say, buy me a book about coins and read me what it say. He does, and he reads up a spell and says, Lord Jesus, girl, these here coins is worth a lot. I says, tell me how much? He says, bein' mint condition like they is, 'round forty-two-thousand-ninety-three, seems to me. Well it took some doing, but I ended up gettin' forty-six. I give the man helped me a twenty dollar bill, and that left me forty-five, nine-hundred-eighty to the good. Now isn't that something? God sure been fine to me."

"Yes, He—well, He certainly has, Pru. I guess you've got to say that . . . ."

The truth is, Alma didn't know *what* to say. She was stunned by the news. All that money from an old tin can? Money lying out in that field for more than a hundred years? Papa and Mama living rag-dirt poor, and nobody ever found a nickel till Pru. Of course, Pru could use the money, that's a fact. But it wouldn't have hurt a thing if one or two of those coins had showed up about 1942.

Pru served Alma a real nice supper, and insisted she stay the night. Alma didn't argue a lot. The trip down had flat worn her out. Pru said she'd fixed up her grandma's room, and Alma didn't have to use the air.

All through the long hot brassy afternoon, while the sun tried to dig through the new weatherstripping and the freshly painted walls, Pru rattled on about the farm and Uncle Fry and how well the garden grew and this and that, talked about everything there was to talk about except Cush. Alma said maybe once or twice, how's Cush doing, and Pru said real quick Cush is doing fine. After that, Alma didn't ask. She tried to pay attention, and marvel at the Kenmore fridge and the noisy Cuisinart, but her mind was never far from the child. Pru seemed to know, seemed to feel the question there between them, felt it hanging in the air. And when she did, she hurried on to some brand new appliance colored fire-engine red or plastic green. And that was as far as Alma got about Cush.

Then, when the day was winding down, when the heat let up and Alma sat on the porch with a glass of iced tea, Pru came up behind her and touched Alma gently on the arm.

"I know you got to see him," Pru said. "I know that's what you gotta do."

Alma sat very still for a while, then she stood and looked at Pru. "The child's my kin," Alma said. "Just because he isn't whole doesn't mean I don't love him all the same."

Pru didn't say a thing. She took Alma's hand and led her down the front steps. The chinaberry trees had grown tall. Their limbs brushed the screened-in porch by the kitchen out back. The ground all around was worn flat, like it always used to be. Worn where the cistern had stood years before, worn on the path that led out behind the house. Alma could see the twisted ghosts of peach trees inside her head. She could see the smokehouse and the outhouse after that, the storm cellar off to the right, and Papa's chicken coop. And when she turned the far corner of the house, there was Cush, sitting in a new red wagon by the steps.

Alma felt herself sway, felt her legs give way, felt her heart might come to a stop. The creature in the wagon looked nothing like a child, nothing like anything that ought to be alive. The baked potato head seemed larger than before, the warped little body parched and seared, dried and shriveled to a wisp. The patchwork pattern of his skin was thick with suppurating sores, pimples and blisters, blots and stains and spots, postules and blotches, welts and bug bites, rashes and swellings and eruptions of every sort. Alma saw the possumlike hands were bent and twisted like a root, saw there wasn't any hair on Cush's head, saw Cush had somehow lost a leg, saw the child wore every conceivable deformity and flaw, every possible perversion of the flesh.

And then Pru sat down on the ground and said, "Cush, this here's your great-aunt Alma Cree. You was too young to recall, but you seen her once before. You want to try an' say hello, you want to try an' do that?"

Cush looked up at Alma with his black and milky eye, looked at Alma through his misery and pain, looked right at Alma Cree and smiled. The smile was something marvelous and terrible to see. One side of Cush's mouth stayed the same, while the other side cut a crooked path past his cheek and past his nose, cut a deep and awful fissure up his face. When you hiccup while you try to sign your name, when the line wanders up and off the page, this is how the smile looked to Alma Cree. Cush's lips parted and secreted something white, then Cush scratched and croaked and made a sound.

"*Haaalm'ah-ah . . . Haaalm'ah-ah,*" Cush said, and then the smile went away.

"*Alma,*" Pru said with pure delight, "that's *right*. See, Aunt Alma? Cush went and said your name!"

"That's real good, Cush," Alma said, "it sure is." She felt the sky whirl crazily about, felt the earth grind its teeth and come apart. She hoped to God she'd make it to the house.

"Pru, you can't take care of that child," Alma said. "You just can't do it by yourself. I know you've done all you could, but poor little Cush needs some help."

"I *got* help, Alma," said Pru, looking at her empty coffee cup. "Since I come into money, Cush has seen every kind of doctor there is. They give me all kinds of lotions, and ever' kind of pill they got. Ain't nothin' works at all, nothin' anyone can do."

"Pru," Alma said, "what happened to his *leg?*"

"Didn't anything happen," Pru said. "Jus' one day 'bout a year ago spring it dropped off. Cush give a little squeal an' I 'bout passed out, and that was all of that."

Tears welled in Pru's eyes. "Aunt Alma, I lay 'wake nights and I wonder just what's going on in God's head. I say, Pru, what's He thinking up there? What you figure He means to do? The farm's all shiny like Jesus reached down and touched the land. It hasn't ever been as fine before. The Lord's took the crazy from my head and got me looking real good, and give me everything there is. So how come He missed helpin' Cush, Aunt Alma? You want to tell me that? How come little Cush is somethin' Jesus flat forgot?"

"I don't know the Lord's ways," Alma said. "I wouldn't know how to answer that." Alma looked down at her hands. She couldn't look at Pru. "What I think I ought to say, what you ought to think about, is you've done about everything you can. There isn't much else you can do. You're young and you've got a life ahead, and there's places where Cush'd maybe be better off than he is . . ."

"No!"

The word came out as strong and solid as the hard red iron that held the bridge. "Cush is my child," Pru said. "I don't know why he's like he is, but he's mine. Alma, he isn't going anywhere but here."

Alma saw the will, saw the fierce determination in Pru, and knew at once there was nothing she could say, nothing that anyone could do.

"All right," she said, and tried her best to smile at Pru, "I guess that's the way it's got to be. . . ."

Cush liked the winter and the fall. In the summer and the spring, everything that creeped and flew and crawled did their best to seek him out. Fire ants and black ants and ants of every sort. Earwigs and stinkbugs and rusty centipedes. Sulphur butterflies made bouquets about his head to suck the sores around his eyes. Horseflies and deerflies bit his cheeks. Mosquitoes snarled about like Fokker D-IIIs, and black gnats clotted up his nose. Bees and yellow jackets stung his thighs. If a certain bug coudn't find Cush, Cush would somehow seek it out. With his single bent foot he'd push his wagon down the road. A scorpion would appear and whip its tail around fast and sting his toe.

His mother tried to keep him in the house. But Cush didn't like it inside. He liked to sit out and watch the trees. He liked to watch the hawks knifing high up in the sky. There were so many wonders to see. Every blade of grass, every new flower that pushed its way up through the soil, was a marvel to Cush's eye. He especially loved the creek. By the time he was five, he stayed there every day he could. He loved to watch the turtles poke their heads up and blink and look around. He loved to see the minnows dart about. There were more things that bit, more things around the creek that had a sting, but Cush was used to that.

Besides, staying indoors didn't help. Fresh paint and new doors and super-snug-tight screens couldn't keep the biters out. They knew Cush was there and they found a way in. Anywhere Cush might be, they wriggled in and found him out.

Cush didn't think about pain. Cush had hurt from the very first moment of his life. He didn't know there was anything else. It had never crossed his mind what *not* to hurt was like. A deaf child wonders what it might be like to hear, but he never gets it right.

Cush knew there was something different other persons felt, something that he sensed was maybe missing in his life. He didn't look like other people did, he knew that. Other people did things, and all he did was sit. Sit and look and think. Sit and get gnawed and stung and bit.

Once, in the late evening light, when Cush sat with his mother on the porch, the fan brought out from inside to try and keep the bugs at bay, Cush tried to sound a thought. That's how he looked at talk—sounding out a thought. He didn't try to sound a lot. Nothing seemed to come out right.

Still, on this night, he tried and tried hard. It was something that he knew he had to do. He worked his mouth up as best as he could and let it out.

After Pru ruled out strangulation or a stroke, she knew Cush was winding up to talk. "Hon, I'm not real sure what you're saying," Pru said, "you want to run through that again?"

Cush did. He tried again twice. Legs from old bugs, bits of vital parts, and something like liver-ripple tofu spewed out.

"*Whuuuma faar?*" Cush said. "*Mudd-whuum-spudoo?*"

Pru listened, and finally understood. When she did, she felt her heart would break in two. She nearly grabbed up Cush and held him tight. She hadn't tried that in three years, but she nearly did it then. "What am I *for?*" Cush had said. "Mother, what am I supposed to *do?*"

Oh Lord, thought Pru, how am I supposed to answer that? Sweet Jesus, put the right words inside my head. Pru waited, and nothing showed up that seemed divine.

"Why, isn't anything you *supposed* to do, Cush," Pru said. "God made the trees and the flowers and the sky, an' everything else there is to see. He made your Aunt Alma and he made you an' me. We're all God's children, Cush. I reckon that's about all we're supposed to be."

Cush thought about that. He thought for a very long time. He looked at his mother's words backward and forward, sideways and inside out. He still didn't know what he was for. He still didn't know what to do. Something, he was sure, but he couldn't think *what.* He was almost certain being one of God's flowers wasn't it.

The trip wore Alma to a nub. She took to her bed for three days, and slept through most of two. When she finally got up, she felt fine. Hungry, and weak in the knees, but just fine. All that driving, and seeing Cush and Pru, Alma thought, that's enough to do anybody in.

She thought about Pru and the farm. How nice Pru looked and how she didn't seem crazy anymore, and how the land and the creek were all coming back again. Everything was doing fine but Cush. Even Uncle

Fry. It was like Pru said. All that good flowing in, and Cush not getting his share. It didn't seem right. It sure didn't seem fair.

Alma looked at the garden and decided it was far beyond repair. She dusted the house and threw the laundry in a sack. She went to the grocery store and back. Late in the afternoon, she got a notebook out and started writing things down. Not for any reason, just something she thought she ought to do. She wrote about the funeral and Uncle John Fry. She wrote about Pru and she wrote about Cush. She wrote about how the land had changed and how the creek was full of fish. Nothing that she wrote told her anything she didn't know before, but it seemed to help to get some things down.

Two weeks back from her trip, Alma got a call. Dotty Mae Kline, who'd taught school with Alma for thirty-two years, had retired the year after Alma did. She lived in Santa Barbara now, and said, Alma, why don't you come and stay awhile?

The idea took her by surprise. Alma thought of maybe fourteen reasons why she couldn't take a trip, then tossed them all aside. "Why not?" she said, and called to see when the next plane could fly her out.

Alma meant to stay a week and ended up staying four. She liked Santa Barbara a lot. It was great to be around Dotty Mae. They saw and did everything they could, and even came close to getting tipsy on California wine. Alma felt better than she'd ever felt before. Dotty Mae said that was the good Pacific air. But Alma knew air couldn't do a whole lot for diabetes, or a heart that now and then made a scary little flop.

When she got back home, Alma found a letter in her mailbox from Pru. The postmark was two weeks old. Alma left her bags in the hall, and opened Pru's letter at once. She saw the scrawly hand running up and down the page, and knew this was likely the only letter Pru had ever written in her life.

> "Dir Ant Alma," it said.
>
> "I bet yur supriz to here from me. The farm is luking fine. A agerkultr man is bout houndin me to deth. He says he don no how corn can git nin feet hi and cabig grow big as washtubs on a place like this. He says there isn no nutrunts in the soil I said I cant help that. Cush dropt a arm last week. Somethin like moss is startid growing on his hed. Otherwiz he doin fine. Uncl Fry is fine too.
> Luv Pru
>
> P.S. Friday last I wun 2 milun dollars from Ed McMahon. Alma heres a twenny dollar bill I got more than I can spend."

"Lord God," Alma said, "all that money to a dumb nigger girl!"

She crushed the letter in her fist. She was overcome with anger, furious at Pru. Things didn't *happen* like that, it wasn't right. All Pru had ever done was get herself knocked up. She hadn't done a full day's work in all her life!

Guilt rushed in to have its say, anger fighting shame, having it out inside her head. Alma was shaken. She couldn't imagine she'd said such a thing, but there it was. She'd tucked it away and out of sight, but it came right up awful quick, which meant it wasn't hiding out too deep.

The anger was there, and it wouldn't go away. Anger at Pru, who was everything she'd spent her life trying not to be. Mama and Papa and Lucy too. Never bringing college friends home because *their* folks were black doctors and CPAs, and she didn't want anyone to know that her family was dirt-poor Alabama overall and calico black, deep-South darkies who said "Yassuh" all the time, and fit the white picture of a nigger to a tee.

She remembered every coffee-chocolate-soot-gray-sable-black face that had passed through her class. Every face for forty-three years. Her soul had ached for every one, knowing the kind of world that she had to send them to. Praying that they'd end up where she was, instead of where she'd been, and all the time saying in her heart, "I'm glad I'm me and I'm not one of *them*."

Alma sat on her couch in the growing afternoon. She looked at her luggage in the hall. She thought about smart-as-a-whip bright and funny Dotty Mae. She thought about Little Rock and Selma, and she thought about Pru.

"I'm still who I am," Alma said. "I might've let something else creep in, but I know that isn't *me*." She sat and watched the day disappear, and she prayed that this was true.

In the morning, when she was rested from the trip, when the good days spent in California seemed to mingle with the pleasure and relief of coming back, when she could look at Pru's letter without old emotions crowding in, Alma got her notebook out and found a brand new page, and wondered what she ought to say.

Alma didn't care for things she couldn't understand. She liked to deal in facts. She liked things that had a nice beginning and an end. Dotty Mae Kline had taught Philosophy and Modern English Lit. Alma Cree had been content with Geometry and French.

She looked at Pru's letter. She looked at what she'd written down before. Everything good seemed to fasten on Pru. Everything bad came to Cush. The farm was on drugs, on a mad horticultural high. Uncle Fry was apparently alive, and she didn't want to think about that. Alma tried to look for reason. She tried to find a pattern of events. She tried to make order out of things that shouldn't be. In the end, she simply set down the facts—though it went against her nature to call them that. She closed up her notebook and put it on the shelf. Completely out of sight. But not even close to out of mind.

Alma kept her quarterly appointment with Dr. Frank. Dr. Frank said, how are we doing, Alma? and Alma said we're doing just fine. Dr. Frank's nurse called back in a week. Dr. Frank wants to make a new appointment and redo some tests. What for? Alma said, and the nurse didn't care to answer that.

Alma hung up. She looked at the phone. She knew how she *felt*, she felt absolutely great. And she wasn't in California now, she was breathing plain Alabama air.

Alma knew what was wrong with the tests, she didn't have to think twice. Everything was fine inside, she didn't need a test to tell her that, and she'd never been more frightened in her life.

Pru woke up laughing and half scared to death. She sat up and looked around the room, making sure everything was fine, making sure everything was sitting where it should. Pru didn't like to dream. She had real good dreams now, everything coral rose and underwater green, nice colors floating all about, and a honey-sweet sax off somewhere to the right. Real good dreams, not the kind she'd had before. Not the kind with furry snakes and blue hogs with bad breath. Good's a lot better'n bad, thought Pru, but I could do without any dreams at *all*.

Pru's idea of what you ought to do at night was go to sleep and wake up. Dreams took you off somewhere that wasn't real, and Pru had come to cherish real a lot. Once you've been crazy, you don't much want to go back. It's sort of like making out with bears, once seems just about enough.

Pru drank a cup of coffee and started making oatmeal for Cush. Cush wouldn't likely touch it, but she felt she ought to try. The sun was an open steel furnace outside, and she turned all the units down to COLD. When the oatmeal was ready, she covered it with foil, found her car keys, and stepped out on the porch.

A light brown Honda was sitting in the drive. A white man was standing on the steps. Pru looked him up and down. He had blow-dry hair and a blue electric suit. He had rainwater eyes and white elevator shoes.

"What you want 'round here," Pru said. "What you doin' on my place?"

"I want to see the child," the man said.

"You ain't seein' any child," Pru said, "now git."

"God bless you," said the man.

"Same to you."

"I'll leave a few pamphlets if you like."

"What I'd *like* is you off my land now, an' you better do it quick."

The man turned and left.

"My boy isn't any freak," Pru shouted at his back. "I better not see your face again!"

She watched until the car disappeared. "Lord God," she said, and shook her head. They'd started showing up about June. She'd put a gate up, but they kept coming in. Black men in beards. White men in suits. Baldheaded men in yellow sheets. Foreign-looking men with white towels around their heads. Pru shooed them all out, but they wouldn't go away.

I want to see the child, is what they said. The way they looked her in the eye flat gave Pru the creeps.

Pru stalked out to the truck. She looked for Uncle Fry. "You all goin' to leave my Cush alone," she said, mostly to herself. "I have to get me a 12-gauge and sit out on the road, you goin' to let my child be."

Uncle John Ezekiel Fry appeared, standing in the corn.

"Uncle Fry," Pru said, "you seen little Cush anywhere?"

"*Goat shit,*" Uncle Fry said. "*Rat's ass-Atlanta, strawberry-pee . . .*"

"Thanks," said Pru, "you're sure a lot of help."

Pru knew where to find Cush. She left the pickup on the bridge, got her oatmeal, and started down the bank. You could leave that child in the house or on the porch. You could leave him on the steps out back. Whatever you did, Cush found his way to the bridge. The bridge was where he wanted most to be.

Pru squatted down and tried to see up in the dark, up past the last gray timbers of the bridge, up where the shadows met the web of ancient iron.

"You in there, Cush?" Pru said. "You tell me if you in there, child."

"*Mmmm-mupper-mudd,*" said Cush.

"That's good," said Pru. She couldn't see Cush, but she knew that he was there. Up in the cavern of the bank, up where the pale and twisted roots hid out from the hot and muggy day.

"I'm leavin' your oatmeal, hon," Pru said. "I'd like you to eat it if you can."

Cush wouldn't, she knew, he never did. The bowls were always where she left them, full of happy ants and flies.

Pru drove up to where the highway met the road to make sure the gate was shut. The man in the Honda was gone. No one else was snooping 'round, which didn't mean they wouldn't be back. I might ought to hire someone, Pru thought. I might send up Uncle Fry. Uncle Fry just standing there would likely keep 'em out.

Driving back across the creek to the house, Pru could see the farm sprawled out in lush array. She could feel the green power there, wild and unrestrained. The air was thick with the ripe and heady smell of summer growth. Every leaf and every blade, every seed and every pod seemed to quiver in the damp and steamy earth. Every fat green shoot pressed and tugged to reach the light, every blossom, every bud, fought to rip itself apart, fought to reach chromatic bliss.

Pru felt light-headed, slightly out of synch, like the time in Georgia when she'd found some good pot. The land seemed bathed in hazy mist. The corn and the house and the chinaberry trees were sharply etched in silver light. Everything was lemon, lavender, and pink, everything was fuzzy and obscure.

"Huh-unh," Pru said, "*no* way, I ain't havin' none of *that.*"

She slammed on the brakes and ran quickly to the house. She moved through every single room and pulled all the curtains tight. She took a cold shower and changed her clothes twice. Then she went to the kitchen and made herself a drink.

Pru knew exactly where all the funny colors came from. They were leftover colors from her dream, and she didn't care for that. She didn't need pastel, she needed bright. She didn't need fuzzy, she needed flat solid and absolutely right. Primary colors are the key. Real is where it's at. Special effects don't improve your mental health.

Pru had watched a TV show that said you ought to learn to understand your dreams. Lord help us, she thought, who'd want to go and do *that?*

Pru fixed herself another drink. "I don't want to see funny colors," she said, "I don't want to know about a dream. I don't want to know 'bout *any*thing, God, I don't already know *now*. . . ."

It surprised Cush to find out who he was. Sometimes, knowing made him glad. Sometimes, it frightened him a lot. One thing it did, though, was answer the questions he'd always had burning in his head. He knew what he was for. He knew for certain now what he had to do.

Cush didn't know *how* he knew, he just did. Mother didn't tell him and he didn't think it up by himself. Maybe he overheard the minnows in the creek. Minnows whisper secrets after dark. Maybe he heard it from the trees. Trees rumble on all the time. If you listen, you can learn a whole lot. If you listen real close, if you can stand to wait them out. A tree starts a word about April twenty-six, and drags it out till June.

Now I know, Cush thought. I know what it is I have to do. He felt he ought to be satisfied with that, he felt it ought to be enough. But Cush was only five. He hadn't had time to learn the end of one question is only the beginning of the next. He knew what he was for. He knew what it was he had to do. Now maybe someone would come and tell him *why* . . .

Cush heard the car stop on the bridge. The doors opened up and the people got out. Cush could see daylight through the planks. All the people wore white. The man and the woman and the boy, everybody spruced up, clean and shining white.

"Y'all stay here," the man said, "I'll drive up to the house."

"I'll read a verse and say a prayer," the woman said.

"Amen," said the little boy.

The man drove off. The woman sat down on a log. The little boy leaned on the railing and spat into the creek.

"Don't wander off," the woman said, "don't wander off real far."

The woman sat and read. The boy watched minnows in the creek. He heard a bird squawk somewhere in the trees. He saw a toad hop off behind a bush. Mother said toads were Satan's pets, but the boy thought toads were pretty neat. He walked off the bridge into the woods. He followed the toad down to the creek.

Stay away, Cush cried out in his head. *Stay away, little boy, don't be coming down here!*

The little boy couldn't hear Cush. The woman was heavy into John 13, and didn't know the little boy was gone. The boy saw the toad a foot away. Cush heard the cottonmouth sleeping in the brush. He heard it wake up and find the toad, heard it sense breakfast on the way.

Cush sat up with a start. Nerve ends nibbled by gnats began to quiver with alarm. Blood began to flow through contaminated pipes. He knew what was coming, what had to happen next.

Don't do it, snake, Cush shouted in his head. *Don't you bite that little boy!*

Snake didn't seem to hear, snake didn't seem to care.

Can't you see that boy's dressed up clean and white? Can't you see that's someone you shouldn't oughta bite?

Cush tried hard to push the words out of his head, tried hard to toss them out, tried to hurl them at the snake. Snake didn't answer. Snake was trying hard to figure where toad ended and little boy began.

Cush could scarcely breathe. He felt the ragged oscillation of his heart. *You want to bite something, bite me,* he thought as hard as he could. *Leave that little boy alone and bite me!*

Snake hesitated, snake came to a halt. It listened and it waited, it forgot about toad and little boy. It turned its viper will to something down below the bridge.

Something white as dead feet slid down a pale vine, something black and wet moved inside a tree. Green snakes, mean snakes, snakes with yellow stripes, king snakes, ring snakes, snakes of every sort began to ripple whip and slither through the bush, began to find their way to Cush. They coiled around his leg and bit his thigh. They wound around his neck and kissed his eye. Rat snakes, fat snakes, canebrake rattlers, and rusty copperheads. Coral snakes, hog snakes, snakes from out of state. Snakes with cool and plastic eyes smelling dry and stale and sweet. White-bellied cottonmouths old as Uncle Fry, some big as sewer pipes, some near as fat as tractor tires.

Snakes hissed and snapped and curled about until Cush was out of sight. Snakes cut and slashed and tried to find a place to bite. And when the fun was all done, when the snakes had managed all the harm they could, they crawled away to find a nap.

Cush lay swollen and distended like a giant Thanksgiving Day balloon, like a lacerated blimp, like a great enormous bloat. Eight brands of venom chilled his blood and couldn't even make a dent. Seventeen diseases, peculiar to the snake, battled the corruption that coursed through Cush every day, tried and gave it up and did their best to get away.

"Mom, guess what," little boy said on the bridge, "I found me a big green toad."

"Sweet Jesus," mother said, "don't touch your private parts until you wash. You do your thing'll fall right off!"

Mother turned to Psalms 91:3. A few minutes later, the car came back down the road. The man picked his family up fast. He'd faced Pru once and didn't care to try again.

Cush thought he heard the car drive away. He thought about the clean little boy. He thought about the nice white clothes. He wondered if his brand-new bites would bring the beetles and the gnats and the horseflies out in force.

It was nearly ten at night when Alma got the call from Preacher Will. Alma's heart nearly stopped. Oh Lord, she thought, it's Cush. Nothing short of death would get Will to use the phone. It's Pru, Will said, and you ought to come at once. What's wrong with Pru? Alma said, and Will rambled on about bad hygiene and mental fits.

Alma hung up. She was on the road at dawn, and at the gate at ten. There were cars parked up and down the highway, RVs and campers and several dozen tents. People stood about in the red dirt road. They sat and ate lunch beneath the trees. Uncle Fry stood guard and he wouldn't let them in.

"Uncle Fry," Alma said, "What exactly's going on? What are these people doing here, and what on earth is wrong with Pru?"

"*Oyster pie,*" said Uncle Fry. "*Commanche-cock-Tallahassee-stew* . . ."

"Well, you're looking *real* fine," Alma said.

Uncle Fry unlocked the gate and let her in. Alma drove down the narrow dusty road toward the bridge. It hadn't been a year since she'd been to see Pru, but she was struck by the way the place had changed. It had flat been a wonder before, springing up new from a worn-out tangle of decay to a rich and fertile farm. She had marveled at the transformation then, but the land was even more resplendent now, more radiant and alive. The very air seemed to shine. Every leaf shimmered, every blade of grass was brilliant green. There were flowers that had certainly never grown here before. Birds that had never come near the place flashed among the trees.

Alma wondered how she'd write it down. That the worst farm in Alabama state was getting prettier every day? That scarcely said a thing. She wished she'd never started taking notes. All she had accomplished was to make herself more apprehensive, more uneasy than before. Putting things down made them seem like they were real. When you saw it on paper, it seemed as if the farm and little Cush and Uncle Fry, and Prudence Jean the millionaire, were just everyday events. And that simply wasn't so. Nothing was going on that made a lick of sense. Nothing that a reasonable person who was over sixty-five liked to think about at all.

"All right, I'm here," Alma said. "I want to know what's happening with Pru. I want to know what's going on. I want to know *why* those people are camping at the gate."

Preacher Will and Dr. Ben Shank were in the kitchen eating Velveeta

Cheese and ginger snaps. Oatmeal cookies and deviled ham. There were Fritos and Cheetos, Milky Ways and Mounds, dips and chips of every sort. Every soft drink known to man. Junk food stock was very likely trading high.

"Folks say they want to see the child," said Preacher Will, popping up a Nehi Orange. "More of 'em coming ever' day."

Alma stared at Will. "They want to see Cush? What for?"

"There's blueberry pie on the stove," said Will.

"You make sure those people stay out," Alma said. "Lord God, no wonder poor Pru's in a snit! What's wrong with her, Ben, besides that?"

"Hard to say," said Dr. Shank, digging in a can of cold pears. "Pixilation of the brain. Disorders of the head. Severe aberrations of the mind. The girl's unsettled somewhat. Neurons slightly out of whack."

Alma had never much cared for Ben Shank. What could you say about a man who'd spent his whole adult life working on the tonsil transplant?

"Fine," Alma said, "you want to kind of sum it up? What's the matter with her, Ben?"

"Pru's daffy as a duck."

"I wouldn't leave Satan out of this," said Will.

"Maybe *you* wouldn't, *I* would," Alma said. "Where's Pru now?"

"Up in her room. Been there for three whole days, and she won't come out."

"That girl needs care," said Dr. Shank. "You ought to keep that in mind. I know a real good place."

"The arch fiend's always on the prowl," said Will, "don't you think he's not."

"What I think I better do is see Pru," Alma said.

Alma made her way through the parlor to the hall. Through cartons from K-Mart, Target, and Sears. Through tapes and cassettes, through a stack of CDs, past a tacky new lamp. Coming into money hadn't changed Pru's taste a whole lot.

Pru's room was nearly dark. The windows were covered up with blankets and sheets. The sparse bit of light that seeped in gave the room an odd undersea effect.

"Pru," Alma said, "you might want to talk me in. I don't care to fall and break a leg."

"I'm not crazy anymore," Pru said. "An' I don't care what that fool preacher says, I haven't got a demon in my foot."

"I know that," Alma said. She groped about and found a chair. "What you think's the matter with you, Pru? Why you sitting up here in the dark?"

Pru sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed. Alma couldn't see her face or read her eyes.

"If I'm sittin' in the dark, I can't *see,*" Pru said. "I don't want to see a thing, Alma, seeing's what messes up my head."

"Pru, what is it you don't want to see," Alma said, almost afraid to ask. "You want to tell me that?"

"I ain't going to a looney house, Alma, that's a fact."

"Now, nobody's going to do that."

"I sit right here, I'll be fine. Long as I keep out the light."

"You don't like the light?"

"I flat can't take it no more," Pru said. "I can't stand anything *pink*. Everything's lavender or a wimpy shade of green. Everything's got a fuzzy glow. I'm sick to death of tangerine. I feel like I fell into a sack of them after-dinner mints. Lord, I'd give a dollar for a little piece of brown. I'd double that for something red."

Pru leaned forward on the bed. Alma reached out and found her hands. Her eyes were big and round and her hands were like ice.

"I'm scared, Aunt Alma," Pru said. "Corn don't come in baby blue. I never seen a apricot lettuce in my life. I *know* what's going on, I know that. Them Easter egg colors is leakin' through out of my dreams. They're comin' right in and I can't hold 'em back!"

Alma felt a chill, as if someone had pressed a cold Sprite against her back. She held onto Pru real tight.

"I haven't seen any blue corn," Alma said, "but I know what you're telling me, Pru. I want you to think on that, you understand? Hon, it isn't just *you*, it's not just something in your head. I could feel it driving in, like everything's humming in the ground. Like every growing thing on the place is just swelling up to bust."

Alma gripped Pru's shoulder and looked right in her eyes. "You've got about the prettiest farm there is, but you and I know it isn't how it *ought* to be. It doesn't look right, Pru, and it isn't any wonder that you're having color problems in your head. Shoot, this place'd send Van Gogh around the bend."

"Oh God, Aunt Alma, I'm scared," said Pru, "I'm scared as I can be!"

Tears trailed down Pru's cheeks and Alma took her in her arms.

"It's going to be fine," Alma said. "Don't you worry, it'll be just fine."

"You ain't goin' to leave me here, are you?"

"Child, I am staying right here," Alma said, "I'm not going anywhere at all."

Alma held her tight. She could feel Pru's tears, she could feel her body shake. I'm sure glad you're hugging real good, Alma thought, so you won't know that I'm scared, too.

Alma shooed Will and Dr. Shank out the door and started cleaning up the house. The kitchen took an hour and a half. She worked through geologic zones, through empty pizza cartons and turkey pot pies. Through Ritz Cracker boxes and frozen french fries. It might be that malnutrition was affecting Pru's head, Alma thought. A brain won't run in third gear on potato chips and Mounds.

She had the house in shape by late afternoon. Pru seemed better, but she wouldn't leave her room. Alma was alarmed to learn that Cush stayed at the creek all the time, that he wouldn't come back to the house at all.

"It isn't right," Alma said. "A little boy shouldn't live beneath a bridge."

"Might be he shouldn't," Pru said, "but I reckon that he *is*."

Alma fixed Pru supper, and took a plate up to the gate for Uncle Fry. If Uncle Fry had moved an inch since she'd left him there at ten, she couldn't tell. The cars were still there. People stood outside the gate and looked in. They didn't talk or move about. Some of the men had awful wigs. Some of the men were bald. Some of the men wore bib overalls. More than a few wore funny robes. They all gave Alma the creeps. What did they want with *Cush?* What did they think they'd *see?* As far as that goes, how did they even know that Cush was *there?*

"I don't want to think about that," Alma said, as she drove back toward the creek. "I've got enough on my mind with just Pru."

Alma left the car on the road and took some oatmeal down to Cush. She walked through tall sweet grass down a path beside the bridge, down through a canopy of iridescent green. The moment she saw the creek, she stopped still. The sight overwhelmed her, it took her breath away. Thick stands of fern lined the stream on either side. Wild red roses climbed the trunk of every tree. Fish darted quicksilver-bright through water clear as air. Farther toward the bend, red flag and coralroot set the banks afire.

There was more, though, a great deal more than the eye could truly see. Standing on the bank in dusky shade, standing by the creek in citron light, Alma felt totally at peace, suspended in the quiet, inconceivably serene. The rest of the farm seemed far away, stirring in the steamy afternoon, caught up in purpose and intent, caught in a fever, in a frenzy of intoxicated growth.

The creek was apart from all that. It was finished and complete, in a pure and tranquil state. Alma felt certain nothing more could happen here that could possibly enhance this magic place. She felt she was seven, she felt she was ten, she felt her sister Lucy by her side. And as she stood there caught up in the spell, lost in the enchantment of the day, her eyes seemed to draw her to the bridge, to the shadows under old and rusted iron.

Alma held her breath. Something seemed to flicker there, vague and undefined, something like a dazzle or a haze. A pale shaft dancing for an instant through the quiet. Dust motes captured in an errant beam of light. It was there and it was gone and it wasn't gone at all.

"*Hello, Aunt Alma,*" Cush said.

Alma stood perfectly still. She felt incredibly calm, she felt frightened and alarmed, she felt totally at ease.

"*Are you there, Aunt Alma, are you there?*"

"I'm right here, Cush," Alma said. "I'm glad to see you're talking some better than you could." His voice was a croak, like gravel in a can. "I've brought you some oatmeal, hon. You need to eat something hot and good."

"Tell mother that I'm doing just fine," Cush said. *"You tell her that for me."*

"Now, you ought to tell her that yourself," Alma said, "that's what you ought to do. Cush, you shouldn't be staying down here. You shouldn't be out beneath a bridge."

"I'm where I ought to be," Cush said.

"Now, why you say that?"

"This is where I got to stay, this is where I got to be."

"You already told me that. What I'd like to know is *why.*"

"This is where I am, Aunt Alma. Right here's where I got to be."

He may be different, Alma thought, but he's just as aggravating as any other child I've ever known.

"Now, Cush—" Alma said, and that's as far as Alma got. Words that might have been were never said. Alma was struck by a great rush of loneliness and joy, shaken to her soul by a wave of jubilation and regret, nearly swept away by chaos and accord.

As quickly as it came, the moment passed and let her go. Let her go but held her with the faint deep whisper of the earth. Held her with a hint of the sweet oscillation of the stars. She tried to remember the universal dance. Tried her best to hum the lost chord. There were things she had forgotten, there were things she almost knew. She hung on the restive edge of secrets nearly told, a breath away from mysteries revealed. She wondered if she'd died or if she'd just come to life. She wondered why they both looked just the same.

And when she found herself again, when her heart began to stir, she looked into the shadow of the bridge. She looked, and there was Cush. Cush, or a spiderweb caught against the sun; Cush, or a phantom spark of light.

"Cush, I know you're there," Alma said. "Cush, you *talk* to me, you hear?"

Alma stood and listened to the creek. She listened to a crow call far off in the trees. She listened and she waited in the hot electric summer afternoon. . . .

Pru wasn't any better and she wasn't any worse. Pastel shades were still clouding up her head. Mint seemed the color of the day. She said she felt she had a rash, and took three or four baths before dark. She soaked herself in European soap and rubbed Chinese lotions on her skin. Every hour and a half, she completely changed her clothes.

Alma couldn't take all the bathing and the changing and the scurrying about. It made her dizzy just to watch. She prowled through the kitchen, searching for anything that wasn't in a can or in a sack. Lord God, Alma thought, there's a garden outside that would bring Luther Burbank to tears, and Pru's got a corner on Spam.

She went outside and picked several ears of corn. She yanked up carrots big as Little League bats. She made a hot supper and a salad on the side, and took it up to Pru. Pru picked around a while and wrinkled up her nose.

"What kinda stuff is this?"

"Those are vegetables, Pru. You probably never saw one before. We grow 'em all the time on Mars."

"I ain't real hungry right now."

"Pretend you've got Fruit Loops and a Coke," Alma said. "I'll leave your plate here."

Alma went back downstairs and ate alone. She took a lot of time cleaning up. She did things she didn't have to do. She didn't want to think. She didn't want to think about Cush or what had happened at the bridge.

Nothing did any good at all. Cush was in her head and he wouldn't go away. "I don't even know what *happened* out there," Alma said. "I don't know if anything *did*."

Whatever it was, it had left her full of hope and disbelief, full of doubt and good cheer, full of bliss and awful dread. She felt she was nearly in tune, on the edge of perfect pitch. She felt she nearly had the beat. That's what he did, Alma thought. He gave me a peek somewhere and brought me back. Brought me back and never told me where I'd been.

Alma left the house and walked out onto the porch. The air was hot and still. Night was on the way, and the land and the sky were strangely green. It looked like Oz, right before the wizard came clean.

Oh Lord, Alma thought, looking out into the quickly fading light, I guess I knew. I knew and I didn't want to see. I wrote it all down and I thought that'd make it go away. The farm and the money and Uncle John Fry, nothing the way it ought to be. And all of that coming out of Cush. Coming from a child with awful skin and a baked potato head.

"Who *are* you, Cush," Alma called into the night. "Tell me who you are, tell me what you got to do!"

The cornfield shimmered with luminescent light. The air seemed electric, urgent and alive, she could feel it as it danced along her skin, she could feel the night press upon the land, she could feel the deep cadence of the earth.

"It's going to happen," Alma said, and felt a chill. "It's going to happen and it's going to happen here. *Who are you, Cush,*" she said again. *"Tell me what it is you've got to do. . . ."*

Alma tried to rest. She knew she wouldn't get away with that. Not in Pru's house, and not tonight. She dozed now and then. She made tea twice. The wind picked up and began to shake the house. It blew from the north, then shifted to the south. Tried the east and tried the west, and petered out.

A little after one, she fell asleep. At two, she woke up with a start. Pru was screaming like a cat. Alma wrapped her robe around herself and made her way back up the stairs.

"Don't turn on the light!" Pru shouted, when Alma opened up the door.

"Pru, I'm getting tired of trying to find you in the dark," Alma said. She felt her way around the walls. A glow from downstairs showed her Pru. She was huddled on the floor in the corner by the bed. She was shaking like a malted-milk machine: and her eyes were fever bright.

"Pru, what's the *matter* with you, child?" Alma sat down and held her tight.

"Oh God," Pru said, "my whole insides are full of fleas. It might be fire ants or bees, it's hard to tell. They're down in my fingers and my toes. They're crawling in my knees."

Alma felt Pru's head. "I'd say you're right close to a hundred and three. I'll find you an aspirin somewhere. I'll make a cup of tea."

"I've got some Raid beneath the sink, you might bring me some of that. Oh Jesus, Aunt Alma, I'm scared. I think something's wrong with Cush. I think he needs his mama bad. I think I better go and see."

"I don't think Cush needs a thing," Alma said, "I think Cush is doing fine. Pru, you better come downstairs and sleep with me. We'll keep off all the lights."

"Don't matter," said Pru. "Dark helps some, but it don't keep the pinks from sneakin' in. I can take them limes, I can tolerate the peach, but I can't put up with pink."

"I'll get a pill," Alma said, "you try and get some sleep."

Alma helped Pru back into bed and went out and closed the door. Lord God, she thought, I don't know what to do. You can't hardly reason with a person's got decorator colors in her head.

Alma's watch said a quarter after three. She didn't even try to go to bed. She sat in the kitchen and drank a cup of tea. She tried not to think about Cush. She tried not to think about Pru. Everything would work itself out. Everything would be just fine. She could hear Pru pacing about. Walking this way and that, humming a Ray Charles tune. Likely works good in the dark, Alma thought.

At exactly four o'clock, the lights began to flicker on and off. The wind came up again, this time blowing straight down. Alma knew high-school science by heart, and she'd never heard of *that*. Cups and dishes rattled on the shelves. The teapot slid across the sink. Cabinets and drawers popped open all at once. Peanut butter did a flip, and food from overseas hopped about.

Alma held onto the Kenmore stove. She knew that Sears made their stuff to last. In a moment, the rumbles and the shakes came abruptly to a halt. The wind disappeared, and Alma's ears began to pop. Something spattered on the window, something drummed upon the roof, and the rain began to fall. Alma ran into the parlor and peeked out through the blinds. Pink lightning sizzled through the corn. Every bush and every tree, every single blade of grass, was bathed in pale coronal light. Light danced up the steps and up the porch and in the house. It danced on the ceiling on the walls and on the floor. It crawled along the tables and the lamps.

Lord, Alma thought, this isn't going to set well with Pru. She listened, but she didn't hear a sound from upstairs. Pru wasn't singing anymore, but she wasn't up stomping or crying out.

The rain stopped as quickly as it came. Alma stepped out onto the porch. The very air was charged, rich and cool and clean. It made Alma dizzy just to breathe. The sky overhead was full of stars. The first hint of morning started glowing in the east, darts of color sharp as Northern Lights. And as the day began to grow, as the shadows disappeared, Alma saw them everywhere about, people standing in the road, people standing in the corn, people standing everywhere, and everyone looking past the field and through the woods, everyone looking toward the bridge.

Alma looked past the corn, past the people and the trees. Something pure and crystal bright struck her eyes, something splendid as a star, something radiant and white. Alma caught her breath. She looked at the light and she laughed and cried with joy. She felt she ought to sing. She felt goofy in the head, she felt lighter than a gnat. She felt as if someone had shot her up with bliss.

"It's going to happen," Alma said, "it's going to happen and it's going to happen here!"

Alma couldn't stay put. She couldn't just stand there with glory all about. She sprang off the porch and started running down the road. She hadn't run like that since she was ten. She ran down the road past the people, toward the bridge. The people sang and danced, the people swayed and clapped their hands. Alma passed Uncle John Ezekiel Fry. Uncle Fry grinned from ear to ear, and the light sparked off his tears.

"He's coming!" people shouted, "he's coming and he's just about here!"

"I can see him," someone said, "I can see him in the light!"

Alma was sure she heard bells, a deep sonorous toll that touched her soul and swept her clean. A noise like a thunderclap sounded overhead. Alma looked up, and the air was full of birds. Storks and cranes and gulls, hawks and terns and doves, eagles and herons, every kind of bird there was.

Alma laughed at the sky, Alma laughed at the bells, Alma laughed at the music in her head. It was Basin Street jazz, it was Mozart and Bach, it was old time Gregorian Rock.

Alma couldn't see the road and she couldn't see the bridge. She felt enveloped and absorbed. She felt like she was swimming in the light. It dazzled and it glittered and it sang. It hummed through her body like carbonated bees. It looked like the center of a star. It looked like a hundred billion fireflies in a jar.

"I *knew* you were something special, Cush," Alma cried. "I knew that, Cush, but I got to say I never guessed *who!*"

The light seemed to flare. It drowned her in rapture, an overdose of bliss. It was much too rich, too fine and too intense. It drove her back with joy, it drove her back with love. It lifted her and swept her off her feet. It swept her up the road and past the field and past the yard, and left her on the porch where she'd begun.

"Better not get too close," someone said, "better not get too near the light."

"That's my grand-nephew," Alma said, "you likely didn't know that. I guess I can do about anything I please."

Cush knew who he was. He knew what he was for. He knew what it was he had to do. And now, for the first time in his short and dreary life, in a life full of misery and pain, in a life filled with every dire affliction you could name, Cush knew the reason *why*. When he knew, when it came to him at last, Cush was overwhelmed with the wonder of the thing he had to do. It was awesome, it was fine, it was a marvel and a half, and Cush laughed aloud for the first time in his life.

And in that very instant, in the echo of his laugh, the spark that had smouldered in his soul, that had slept there in the dark, burst free in a rush of brilliant light. The light was the power, and Cush was the light, and Cush reached out and drew everything in. Everything wrong, everything that wasn't right. He drew in envy and avarice and doubt. He called in every plague and every blight. He called in every tumor, every misty cataract. He called in AIDS and bad breath. Ingrown toenails, anger and regret. The heartbreak of psoriasis, the pain of tooth decay. Migraines and chilblains, heartburn and cramps. Arthritic joints and hemorrhoids. Spasms and paralytic strokes. Hatred and sorrow and excess fat. Colic and prickly heat and gout.

Cush drew them all in, every sickness, every trouble, every curse, and every pain. Cush called them down and drew them into healing light, where they vanished just as if they'd never been.

"I got it all sopped up, I did what I came to do," Cush cried, *"I got everything looking real fine!"*

Cush was the power, and Cush was the light. He was here and he was there, he was mostly everywhere. He could see Cincinnati, he could see Bangladesh. He could see Aunt Alma, see her rushing up the stairs. He could see his mother's room filled with swirls of pastel light. He could see her as she cried out with joy and surprise, see the wonder in her face, see the beauty in her smile as something blossomed inside her, blossomed for a blink and then appeared with silver eyes.

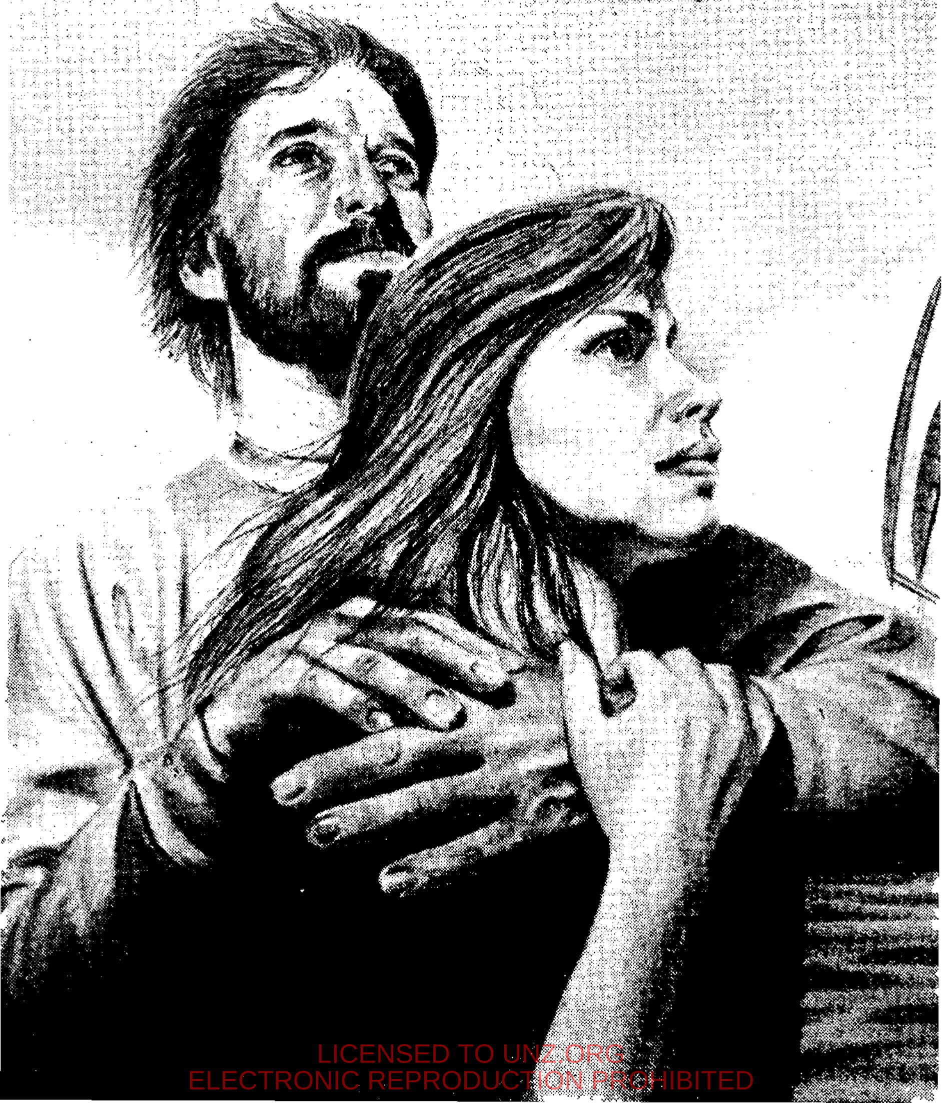
"Got it all ready for you, little sister," Cush called out from the light, *"Got it looking real fine, just as pretty as can be. I've done about all there is to do!"*

All the people standing in the road and in the field saw the light begin to quiver hum and shake, saw it rise up from the bridge, saw it rush into the early morning light.

"Hallelujah," said Uncle John Fry, standing in the tall green corn. "hallelujah-Chattanooga-*bliss*. . . ." ●

At that time Jack and Felix were living in Eden, Felix was really Felicia, Love had just been invented, and the Garden was on the sea.

Limekiller gave his sunstained hair a shake, and began to get the sail up. Felix had already finished tying the skiff—he no longer checked to see if she were doing it right—and, jaw set, was giving an extra push down on the pole to which the *Saccharissa* had been, and the skiff now was, tied. *Prob*ably the skiff would still be there when they returned. It would be an extra drag to tow it under sail, and besides, they would not

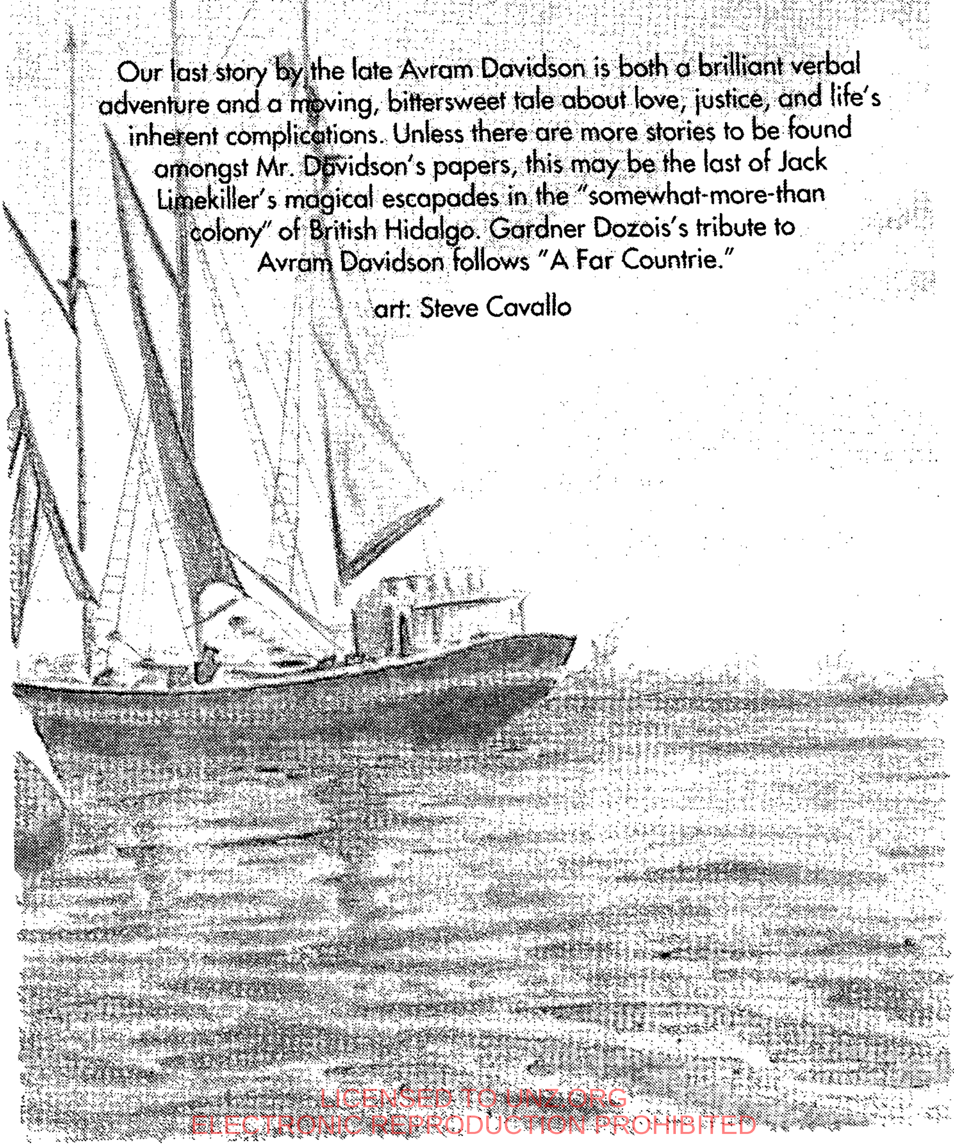


A FAR COUNTRIE

Avram Davidson

Our last story by the late Avram Davidson is both a brilliant verbal adventure and a moving, bittersweet tale about love, justice, and life's inherent complications. Unless there are more stories to be found amongst Mr. Davidson's papers, this may be the last of Jack Limekiller's magical escapades in the "somewhat-more-than colony" of British Hidalgo. Gardner Dozois's tribute to Avram Davidson follows "A Far Countrie."

art: Steve Cavallo



need it where they were going. It had taken them from Cornmeal Wharf to the wide waters of the harbor, but there was a wharf or dock at their destination. Behind, ahead, and all around them, others there, in the mouth of the Belinda (or Old Main) River, which was King Town's Harbor, were doing the same or similar things to their own vessels. Some were going out for conch, some for sand or pipeshank-coral. Some for lobster. And some for fish. Well . . . some mainly for fish, and some for fish as well.

From astern Limekiller heard a voice ask the familiar question, "You no forget de 'drop,' mahn?"

And the answer, in the pearly light of pre-dawn: "Me forget me head, may-be. But no forget me 'drop.' "

The somewhat more than colony of British Hidalgo abuts on the Great Bay of Hidalgo; the main things about the Great Bay of Hidalgo is that God has put in it fish for the Bayfolk and the Black Arawack to eat but that God has not put enough fish in it for the Bayfolk and the Arawack to eat all the fish they want to eat. That is not to say that they are always hungry, but it is to say that they are always hungry for fish. A local proverb goes, *If there is not a plaintain, there is a banana*; and there is usually, also, for the Arawack, cassava, and, for the Bayfolk (who are also called Creoles), rice and beans. Both people will eat meat, *Yea but we will eat flesh,* when they can get it; except that the Bayfolk will not eat any fowl which has served an obeah purpose (and if you ask them why not, they say because it will make a man lose his "nature" and a woman lose her milk); and the Arawack will never under any circumstances eat goat meat whether they can get it or not: and you must never, *ever,* ask them why not.

But best of all and most of all, they both love fish.

It is not only unheard of for any of them deliberately to take to the water without a "drop" (i.e., a drop-line) to tow behind, it is inconceivable. They will eat the quash, a sort of lean-tailed raccoon; they will eat the gibnut, a kind of large and large-eyed rodent; they will eat the dark mauve meat of the "mountain-cow," or tapir; they will eat crocodile tail and the "bocrob" or blue crab and the hind legs and red eggs of the iguana: but most of all, given any opportunity at all, they will eat fish.

But Limekiller and Felix were not going out for fish.

A brochure printed by what was still graciously named The Visitors' Bureau contains the lines: *"British Hidalgo's numerous and picturesque lagoons, colorful coral reefs, sand banks and beaches together with clear blue skies and tropical vegetation, combine to provide this lovely little country a scenic beauty which, together with a mild climate and the friendly welcome of its people, forms the basis of its tourist industry."*

This is, in fact, or, at any rate, very often in fact, a True Relation: although perhaps *industry* is too strong a word, and despite the Hotels Encouragement Act, Conrad Hilton somehow lacked the courage. Still, it *is,* in so many ways, a "lovely little country," that one can perhaps understand its being coveted by other and rather larger countries.

Not so many years ago, it is well-known, the Director of Correspondence in the *Republic* of Hildago struck yet another blow for the liberation of what he and his countrymen still (after three hundred years) call *Hidalgo Occupado,* or *Hidalgo Ingles:* letters addressed to *Inglaterra,* he ruled, would be no more delivered . . . not, at least, until the Occupied Districts, falsely called "English," were returned to their rightful allegiance, *videlicet,* the *Republic* of Hidalgo. This was front-page news for one full day throughout *Centroamerica y Darien,* with the implication of an isolated England supinely treating for a pax hispanica. (The ruling is, so far as anyone knows, technically still in effect; and the few letters which actually travel between Ciudad Hidalgo and, say, Birhmagnan, Mahcesthre, Liberpúl, and Londres—these being, it is also well-known, the only inhabited places in that distant and ice-bound Island, with its odd-*odd* names—are required to disguise their destination under the novel soubriquet of *Gran Bretannia.)* —A blow! Unquestionably a blow. One which could certainly not fail of effect, and of immediate effect at that.

And yet . . . somehow . . . somehow . . . British Hidalgo, for reasons inexplicable (or, anyway, inexplicable in *Centroamerica y Darien),* failed to become Republican, Roman Catholic, and Mestizo-Ladino; and remained, as long it had been, Autonomously Monarchial, Nominally Protestant, and Predominantly Black. And, also, possessed of a memory like a wind of long fetch: not a single schoolchild cannot tell you how, when Don Diego Bustamente y Bobadilla, Sub-Admiral of the Spanish Main, came crawling down the Crawfish Channel with his armada of three shallow-draft galleys, intent on lowering the Union Jack, establishing the Inquisition, and raising both the Spanish Ensign and the tax on nutmeg—the Royal Navy being elsewhere at the time, either fighting the French for Canada or perhaps it was the Swedes for Spitzbergen—the Baymen both Black and White hastily mounted logs on cartwheels, stained them cannon-black with tar, and vigorously rolled up barrels of, presumably, gunpowder (actually: *rum)*; and thronged threateningly around with lighted matchrope as they sighted their pseudo-weaponry. . . . Don Diego and his three galleys prudently crawled back.

"And him de same mon who defeat de Torks at Toronto! Ah, but de Sponiard is ah fool, mon! De Sponiard is ah *fool!"*

TODAY'S THE DAY

Stop Smoking.

American Heart Association

Limekiller had once earnestly urged that the site of Don Diego's victory over the Turks must have been *Lepanto*—

> *Strong gongs groaning as the guns boom far,*
> *Don John of Austria is going to the war.*
> *Stiff flags straining in the night-blasts cold,*
> *In the gloom black-purple, in the glint old-gold. . . .**

—as a Canadian he could hardly do less—but found that the dates did not fit, and so gave up. *Be that as it may.*

Be that as it may: although the boulevard which sweeps along the lower foreshore of King Town, then as now the capital of British Hidalgo, has some time since been renamed "Caribbean Crescent," hardly anyone ever calls it anything but *Artillery*. Like *Government,* it requires no definite article. This road, once the open space of the "quaker cannon" which had frightened off much the smallest squadron of the much-cuckolded king; *I disdained to risk the valued vessels of* el Rey *against so wretched a rabble of heretics and slaves*, reported Don Diego; after a long and preoccupied pause, *Yo el Rey* rewarded this thoughtfulness with a barrel of amontillated sherry which had gone bad in the royal cellars—though at least he did not invite Don Diego to descend and sample it on location—this road is planted with palms and jacarandas and palms and casuarinas and palms and more palms; it contains Government House and many fine private residences at one end, and the Chief Minister's House and many fine private residences at the other; and in between are such edifices as the National Library and Archives, the United Banana Boat Company offices, the two leading hotels and the three leading guest houses (and, since we are on the subject, many fine private residences): also the Public Park, and the Princess Minnie Monument. All these buildings are invariably in as fine a state as paint and labor can keep them in, which is, usually, very fine indeed. From the sea, then, King Town presents a very fine appearance indeed. There is, however, more to King Town than its foreshore buildings and boulevards, however called and however kept . . . much *much* more. And not all of this appears quite so fine at all. Perhaps this is inevitable. And perhaps not.

A bumboat passed by the *Saccharissa*, carrying fruit for the South, or Main, Market (the North, or Little, Market was supplied via Cutlass Creek; it was also one of the three places roundabout King Town where the smoking of weed was, if not condoned, tolerated). The bumboatman had opened his mouth for a jovial and innocently obscene greeting, but, suddenly seeing Felix, had left his mouth silent but still open; his eyes moved to Limekiller, expressed appreciation and respect; then he plied his paddle again. There were not many beautiful redheads in King Town.

There were not even many ugly ones.

**Lepanto*, G. K. Chesterton

A full score of vessels were silently swooping out onto the Bay on sails catching the early breeze, hulls catching the early tide, the wings of the morning sails and hulls took. A few although an increasing number of them did have auxiliary engines (an "ox," it was called), but no true Bayman would use gas when he had a wind or tide. The *Saccharissa* of course had nothing but her mainsail, her jib, her spare pole, and her paddle . . . actually, her skiff's paddle, but kept aboard when the skiff was not in use. As now. The air was grey and moist and cool, so cool that each of the million mosquitoes had his or her head tucked under its wing, so to speak. The sun was so far just an anticipatory smudge on the horizon, but there was light enough.

The *Saccharissa* was John Lutwidge Limekiller's boat and Felix Anne Fox was John Lutwidge Limekiller's lady: of course the apostrophe-s did not imply the same degree of affiliation in each case and so it would probably be much better to say that the *Saccharissa* was John Lutwidge Limekiller's boat and John Lutwidge Limekiller was Felix Ann Fox's lover. She had been "settling into" the boat; if she had felt even surprise not to say disappointment that it was absolutely no landlubber's conception of a yacht, that it had rough and largely unpainted wooden insides (the hull, of course, had to be regularly painted outside . . . after, of course, having been previously and regularly scraped clean, and caulked), a soggy inner bottom with here and there a small though very real, very alive crab which had come aboard as inadvertant cargo during the vessel's days as a sandboat; if the total absence of brightwork, if the sanitary conveniences were barely sanitary and certainly inconvenient (consisting of a jury-rigged curtain over the doorless cubbyhold behind which—the curtain—there was a can (not a slang "can," a real can, though a very large one) with sometimes sand inside, which went over the side—taking very good care it went with and not against the wind—with the rest of its contents; sloshed with sea-water and replaced for next time)—if Felix had or had had any qualms about any or all . . . well, nothing like a complaint had shown.

She had, which was just as important, every bit as, not gone, either, to the other extreme to overpraise. She had accepted. Accepted the rough old boat and all, as simply as she had, simply, accepted him. "I'm just traveling and raveling," she'd said. "Travel and ravel along with me," he'd said, heart leaping. And she? "Yes." That was all. *All?* Is there a more joyful syllable in the language? In the tongue of men and of angels?

Felix had learned to balance her long legs in the rudely made skiff, shaped almost like a flat-iron, seatless, so that you had to squat to paddle or stand up to pole. She had learned to share with him the simple way of cooking the few simple foods in the sand-filled scrap metal firebox called the caboose; and as for ropes or lines or sails . . . well, well, she had learned. And learned well; never having learned any boating before, she had anyway nothing to unlearn now. All of this, and much more, then, she had learned to do for the boat, and so, in no small way, for him: what had he learned to do for her? he found himself asking now, watching her. There were, of course, all the lovely things which they had learned to do for each other: she/he, he/she. They had of course their problems: but they had been nice problems. And it had certainly been nice the way they had learned to solve them. Together. Mostly they had solved them on their first voyage. He recalled that now. He recalled her voice in his ear. He recalled how much he had rejoiced in that: and how much also he had rejoiced in that the bamboo boom—the spar to which the foot of the mainsail fastened—was hollow, and slightly cracked lengthwise—it still was, of course, and never would he fix it now!—this had anyway not at all impaired its usefulness and the hollow and the crack and the wind had turned it into a sort of aeolian harp, and it had sung for them all the day long its long sweet song for "their watery epithalamion. . . ."

The boom at right angles rode the mast in a wooden yoke; the mast was of local Santa Maria wood, twenty-six years old, and still looked fresh.

The date today was early in December.

Abruptly, Felix asked, "What kind of rope are you using there?"

"What kind of— Why . . . hemp . . . of course. Why do you—"

She broke into his perplexity with, "What? Not nylon?"

A moment more he stared; then his blunt and shaggy face relaxed, and he guffawed. Her seriousness now revealed as merely mock-seriousness, she laughed with him: what a delight her laugh was. And what a more-than-delight, her presence.

A day or two before, on Cornmeal Wharf, a conversation between two Bayfolk wharfside superintendents; the subject: *rope*.

"Nylon rope very modern."

"*Oh* yes. Fah true, fah true."

"Nylon rope *very* modern, nah true?"

"*Oh* yes."

"Hempen rope, *w'old* style, nah true?"

"*Oh* yes. Time of my *great*-gron-fahder, he hahv sailing-*ship* go four time ah year fah Cuba, fah Jamaica: use hempen rope. . . ."

"De Mexicans punishing, so many people buy ny*lon*, not buy hemp. Mexican grow *hemp*, not ny*lon*."

"Ny*lon* rope lahst much *lahng*-ah."

"*Oh* yes. Eet sleek, some."

"What you say?"

"Ny*lon* rope *very* sleek. Sleep t'rough you hond. Sleep de knots, you know."

"Well, dot ee's true. Ny*lon* rope very sleepery. Muss use cleats."

"Cleats cahst *mon*-ey, mon. Nah true?"

"Fah true, fah true. Ny*lon* rope cahst *mah* dan hemp, mottah ahv fock."

"*Oh* yes. Me no want buy eet."

"*Me* no want buy eet. Sleep de knots, cahn't get greep on eet, requiah *cleats*, cahst too much."

"Fah true, fah true."

"Yes, mon. Fah true. . . ."

So much for nylon rope, then, at Cornmeal Wharf. And, for that matter, on the sloop *Saccharissa*, Jno. L. Limekiller, owner and master.

Who sniffed. "Ah, the sweet salt air!"

"A contradiction in terms, surely?"

" 'Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself.' "

"Yes, I know. You are vast, you contain multitudes."

He wondered if he should swagger on this; decided that he would not. Instead, he said, "Sweet to me, anyway. —Gallards Point Caye, ho!"

"Gall*i*ards."

"Gal-lards."

"The map—"

"The chart—"

They laughed. They laughed a lot when they were together. She went and got both chart and map. Maps. She looked. She looked triumphant. Then she squinted, pouted. Laughed again. "Both right. Chart says *Gallards*, map says Gall*i*ards— Oh. Well, *poot!* The big map says *Galliards*, the little map says *Gallants*."

He shrugged. "Can't spell for sour owl stools, some of them down here." She said, Look who was talking. He asked, surprised, What was *wrong* with his spelling. She said, Anyone who would spell Labor Department with a *u*— He said, quickly, defensively, That was the way all British countries spelled it. She asked, with the *u* before the *o?* He thought it best to ignore this cavil, gestured off to starboard. "Can you say what those are?" *Those* being some greenery-brownery blurs. "I mean, find them on the chart. . . ?"

"I already know. The Duck and Ducklings—*oops!*"

They laughed again, together, at her error. That tiny archipelago was called The Goose and Goslings. By and by they came close enough to observe the shack of the aged light-keeper. No doubt that was the aged light-keeper himself, standing and waving. And . . . what was *that?*

Answering Felix's question, Jack said that *That* was the Union Jack. "Of course the country does have its own flag now, but not all of these old-timers, you know—"

"I can tell that *That*'s the Union Jack, but I mean, *That*—underneath it. Is he surrendering? Or what?"

Jack took a closer squint, but she, on the spy-glass, was already answering her own question. "Oh for goodness sake! That's not a white flag, that's his *shirt!* Just like in a cartoon. . . ." She looked at him, questioningly.

He grunted. "Means he wants something. Custom says we have to go see what it is. And, ah . . ."

" 'Help him out,' yes." She was already picking up the local idiom. Can you help me out for a pint, Sir? ("—of rum," being understood.) Can you help me out, gi' me a borrow of t'ree shilling? Me truck bruck down, could you help me out with a drop to de *gar*age, mon?

The Goose was of course the biggest, but Captain Barber kept his light on the South Gosling, which long experience had shown was just that much higher as to make a difference in anything short of a hurricane. There was no lighthouse, the old man just lit his lamp and hoisted it on high; *his* lamp, he had to supply it himself, Government from early days having felt that this would make whoever kept the light keep it more carefully. Government however did supply the oil, plus a minuscule stipend on which he was not expected to live. On what *did* he live? Menander said that we live as we may and not as we would; there was fish, was there not? Conch. Turtle. He sent, old Captain Barber, now and then a load of red mangrove bark to King Town for Lemuel the tanner there; a stinking trade, but money has no odor. He had some coconut, too. And, also, once a month, from that ancient bequest called Lady Bucknam's Bounty he had once a month a barrel of biscuit. And a bottle of wine.

In a country where prematurely grey meant grey at sixty, Captain Barber's hair was quite white; but he was straightbacked for all of that. He had, on realizing that Felix, dungaree trousers or not, was a woman, gone back into his lee' house and put on his "next" shirt. Now he gave her a courtly bow and a grave, rather shy smile. "Well, Captain," Jack said, "what's this I heard not long ago in Town: you found the iron chest at last?" For this was, after all, probably the real reason for his isolated existence, and not alone a desire for solitude. *The iron chest.* Every stretch of Caribbean coastline has its own iron chest for which men seek and women yearn, full of gold and silver and precious stones; the stranger does right to be often skeptical, but he would do wrong to be always skeptical, for—every now and then—the iron chest is found . . . and, *some*times, at least, *is* found full of gold and silver and precious stones. Who put it there? Who knows? Who *cares?* Sometimes the breath of Hurikan, the old Arawack god of winds and storms. Sometimes the reefs and shoals. Sometimes enemy cannon-shot. And sometimes, of course, *of course*: Captain Edward England. Major Stede Bonnet. Calico Jack Rackam. Terrible Tom Tew. Horrible Ben Hornigold. Unwomanly Anny Bonny. William Kidd, who "murdered Billy More/And laid him in his gore,/Not many miles from shore,/When he sailed . . ." And maybe even Flint, he of the impeccable taste in rum. Even thinking of this made Jack Limekiller hear in his inner ear the parrot screaming.

Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!

Heat or no heat, timbers or no timbers, Limekiller shivered.

"Well, sir. Yes, sir. Oi did foind an oiron chist. For true, sir . . . and mistress. But not the righteous one. No. *Emp*-ty. . . ."

"*Oh,*" Felix gave a sympathetic and quite sincere sigh.

Barber's smile, which had ebbed, renewed itself. "But Oi niver fret nor poine about that, mistress. Ah no. Where there is a one oiron chist, bound to be a next one." His tone did not exactly drop off, and they waited for him to explain his reasons. But he did not do so: useless, clearly, to dawdle in hopes of details as to which stretches of beach or bog or mangrove bluff he went a-prowling and a-probing with his long iron rod, on which bay or bight or cove or creek his dory glided over of nights—if not with its oarlocks muffled, at least with his grapples not assisted by lamplight—

—and, then, perhaps, too, *with* its oarlocks muffled—

"What can we do for you, Captain Barber?" asked Jack, returning with silent sigh entirely into the twentieth century.

The old man gave a deep nod. "Do you suppose, sir . . . sir and mistress . . . that you could help me out with just a bit of sugar for me tea?"

"A cup of sugar?" Felix instantly had on an imaginary gingham apron. "Why of course;" she half-turned to go—

"Oh, *no*, mistress! Not a *cup*. Half a cup will do. Be some other boat, some next one, by and by . . . today, tomorrow . . . when God send . . . whenever. Sailingmen must help the old loightkeeper out: else, may-be: boi and boi: no loight. Not *your* task to do it ahl yourself. —Where you bound, mahn?"

South Gosling *was* as near the desert island of the cartoons as anything could be; Jack realizing and relishing the fact—and the sight—was a bit slow in answering. Back came Felix with the sugar, asked, with an air that showed the question had just occurred to her, "Do you say, 'Gallards Caye,' Captain Barber? Or 'Gall*i*ards Caye'? Or—"

Limekiller broke in, "Or 'Gallants Caye.' Eh? Which?"

Old Barber nodded slowly. "Galleons Caye, so . . ." Then quite evidently a thought suddenly came to his own mind. He faintly frowned. "What day, today? Not St. Nicholas Day?"

Still rolling over in his mind the sound of "Galleons Caye" and mildly amused by yet another variation on a theme, Jack said, "Beats *me*. Why?" ("*Galleons* Caye?" murmured Felix, half-smiling, half-surprised, herself.)

Aloud (said she): "But I *will* have to ask for the cup back. Because we only have two, and he likes his sweeter than I do."

The abstracted faintly unhappy look vanished from the old man's face; face a sort of worn and faded map onto which Europe, Africa, India, and Amerindia had blended. He gave once again that antique, courtly bow. " 'Sweeter than you . . .'? Why, what could *be* sweeter than you, me choild? Captain Limekiller, sir, you have certainly plucked a beautiful blossom in the garden of love." No bullshit about, perhaps they were just *crew*ing together: in tropical British Hidalgo (and is not one of the Tropics that of old goat-footed Capricorn?), a he and a she of any age above the snotty-nosed and below the entirely senescent never did anything like just *crew*ing together: any more than they ever lived together as brother and sister . . . unless of course they happened to *be* brother and sister . . . in which case one could be damned sure that the *he* was involved with someone else's sister and the *she* with someone else's brother.

And why not.

"Why, Captain Barber, how very nice and gallant of you. . . . *Not* Gallants or Galliants Caye, then? You say, 'Galleons Caye'?" Captain B. at the moment was saying nothing. From one pocket he was drawing a pair of specs of gothic mold, and from another a copy of the five-year almanac which, from frequent usage, looked as old if not older. Having searched out the current year, he slowly traced down the days with one finger. Came to a line. Stopped. Read slowly. Slowly looked up. "Why, yes, oh yes. You see—" He held the almanac up and out. "The 6th of December. St. Nicholas's Day. Can't *go* there today, Oi doubt." And he waited for them to acknowledge the truth of what he said. And waited.

"What, 'can't get there from here'?"—Limekiller. Amused.

"Is there some local superstition against it?"—Felix (original name, *Felicia*; and the hell with it, she'd said). —Felix. Interested.

Also, tactless.

She had used a word which, like treason, like perversion, is never acknowledged to be such by those who practice it. Anything as impolite as a display of annoyance was not likely to be shown by Captain Barber to A Lady. Not even disaprobation. He did allow himself, however, to become exceedingly grave, and, in so doing, wiped the smiles off their own faces most effectively.

"Oi am not superstitious. Oi have been educated at the old Anglican Academy. And Oi recollect quite well what St. Pahl said to the Athenians. The sea does not roise boi superstition. The wind does not drop boi superstition. The rains do not commence in Yucatan the same week they do in Darien. Is the day longer on St. John's Day than on Christmas? Tis, 'tisn't it?"

St. *John*'s Day. Great-uncle Leicester Limekiller, a great Freemason, always let everyone know when St. John's Day was, that day of Masonic festivity, or should one say solemnity? Either. Both. What the hell. . . .

"June 21st? Longest day in the—"

"Just so. Just so. And today is St. Nicholas's Day. And no day to be going to Galleons Caye. Oi tell you. A bod day for it. Maybe you won't even be able to fetch up there at all. Oh, not that Oi say that St. Nicholas has anything to do with it himself. Maybe. Patron of sailors, though, hm . . . so . . . *No*." Captain Barber got a firm Anglican hold of himself. "Oi cannot hold with the vain worship of the Saints. Simply, you do see, this 6th day of December, however it be marked: *not* a good day to go to Galleons Caye. It be the wind, you see."

He reached for the worn old almanac, now so close to obolesence and desuetude. "No," said Limekiller. "Frankly, I *don't* see." He held the little booklet out, waited.

The old light-keeper took it back.

"You will," he said.

·

It was because of Alex Brant.

There were a number of North Americans down there in old British Hidalgo, down there on the boggy barm and brink, the soggy margin, of the Carib Sea: and some were very good people and some were not and most of them were variously in between. This is of course true of most people in most places, Truisms are called them because they tend to be true. And one of these North Americans was Alex Brant, and Limekiller had known him for quite a while. Had they first met in the Pelican Bar?

Or in Reuben Swift's boatyard? And if in the Pelican Bar, adjacent and adjunct to the Hotel of the same name, had they been waiting for a drink? Or for a woman? Because they had met, and not just once and again, in both those places. And in others. Someone had summed Alex up as being "slim, muscular, and nervous"; like all summings-up, it left much unsummed. Sometimes he had a moustache or a beard or both. Sometimes he had not. He had formerly lived in another Commonwealth Country, on an island thereof, which he persistently, and, it may be, a trifle bitterly, referred to as "Great Exzema." Had Limekiller himself been asked to sum up his friend, it would have been at greater length, and somewhat as follows:

"Is currently running a small plantation but on occasion acts as a 'White Hunter' or maybe he is *not* now running a plantation but maybe it's chicle time and he is a chicle buyer . . . or buying crown gum, which Wrigley's will not take but will be taken by Third World markets which don't care about any difference but price. Brant buys tortoise-shell, too. Sponges. When available. Exports orchids. At times. Has a small distillery and when sugar is cheap, makes cheap-cheap rum. Sometimes takes boat charters, or he sometimes may plant rice. —Doesn't ha ha hunt *Whites,* hunts *tigers*; not *his* fault that the local jaguar is locally called a tiger, always explains the critter has spots not stripes; still, the very *name*, you know. . . . Well. Tiger hunts as run by Alex Brant in these 1960s are $1,500 for ten days, *kill guaranteed* or money back; if an early kill leaves days unused, will run wild hog hunt if desired, at no extra cost. Sometimes runs boat charter. Lost his ass once in an inter-island cargo schooner and doesn't like to get that tied up (or down) since that time. Will mate with White women or Brown, Black, or Brindle. Smuggling? A wry grimace. Spent seven months in a Spanish-speaking jail once for that; took him seventeen months to recover. Has been All Around, but prefers British Hidalgo because, well, 'it's too poor to be too much corrupted, small enough to put your arms around, just big enough to keep you from getting claustrophobic. Unspoiled?—yes, well—Great Salt Caye is unspoiled, too, but there's nothing there worth spoiling, damnit.'

"Trustworthy? As a friend? Certainly. As a businessman? *Not* necessarily. As company? Always good company."

Alex *Brant.*

The party had been a rather crowded one, but, then, in British Hidalgo, *all* parties were by definition crowded ones. According to the Nationals, a party couldn't *be* too crowded. Of course, not everyone in the Emerging Nation was a National thereof, and so not everyone down there felt accordingly.

"Do you remember, Jack," Alex asked, "that New Year's Eve, we go to that place and she comes out on the verandah as we're coming up the steps and she says to you, 'I'm sorry, but we're quite full up here, and besides, these are *your* guests, not mine,' and with that she turns around and goes back inside again, eh?"

Jack said that he remembered. "She only invited me because I was wearing a necktie and I was only wearing a necktie because I'd been to see the bank manager—didn't help—and I suppose she found *out*."

Felix, sipping her rum-and-Coke, asked, "Who was *she?*"

Alex said, "Lady Bumtrinket."

"What?"

"Not her real name," said Jack. Sipping his. "Close, though."

"Cecilie, anyway. Wife of the Commonwealth Corn Commissioner, or something like that. They didn't stay down here long."

"*Pit*-ty!"

The record player was blaring out the latest hit, hot from Jamaica, where they liked it hot, *I Am Not A Qualified Physician, So I Don't Like To Give De Decision.* Some of the guests were dancing while they were drinking and some were drinking while they were dancing. And some were standing around and—

"Can I get you anything from the buffet, Felix?" asked Alex. "It's just loaded with fashionable munchies, and not a local item among them."

"Well—"

"Imported potted meat product and byproduct, white bread sandwich, with the bread crusts carefully cut off, London style? Salad of imported Republic of Nueva Cartagena cabbage with imported Heinz Salad Cream and imported tinned peas? Some imported sweet-and-soggy biscuits? ('Crackers,' *we* call them.)"

Oh Doctor, I Don't Like De Size of Your Needle, shrieked the record-player. Felix said she thought she'd pass over the fashionable munchies for the time being. Someone said that the Chief Minister, the Rt. Hon. Llewellyn Gonzaga McBride, was present. Or had been. Or was going to be.

"*Really?*" Felix. Looking around eagerly.

"*Bound* to be. *Has* to be." —Alex. "Part of his official duties, laid down in the British Hidalgo Official Duties Act of 1958 as Amended by Orders-in-Council, 1965, '66, and '67: '. . . *and the Chief Minister shall be everywhere at once*. . . ." Fact. That *God* is omnipresent, we take on faith. That the Chief *Min*ister is omnipresent we don't have to take on faith, we can see him for ourselves. —You guys coming out to the Caye tomorrow?"

The party was now at full blast. So was the record player. *He Put It In, He Take It Out; He Put It In, He Take It Out.* The Queen's picture rattled on the wall. The three North Americans gathered close together in order to be able to hear each other shout.

WHICH caye?

GALLARDS Caye.

What's doing THERE?

Party.

What?

A PARTY.

WHOSE party?

Well, really more of a PICnic. *Sort of.*

What?

A JAUNT. *God damn it.*

How come?

Noddy and Neville are going out, too.

Noddy and WHO?

And NEVILLE.

ENGLISH *Neville?*

Oh for Christ sake. NO. *Nor*WE*gian Neville.*

Norwegian WHO?

Oh for Christ sake. YES: ENGLISH NEVILLE.

Oh. Well—

The plenty-decibels saga of the Doctor and His Needle, for which perhaps "suggestive" was far too feeble a word, came to its hysterical conclusion; while someone was trying to fumble the record over to its flip side in haste, lest, God forbid, there should be two seconds' Silence, Alex managed to say that Neville and Noddy were going out to visit Major Deak, whoever Major Deak was, at Gallards Caye, along with Neville's girlfriend and Noddy's lady (ladies lived-in, girlfriends did not) and large hampers of victuals and Alex Brant and lots to drink and a couple of Nationals and their wives, ladies, and/or etc. and so—Alex suggested—why not Jack and Felix, too?

"We're going in my launch," he wound up.

Felix knew Alex's launch, at least by sight. "Wouldn't it be kind of crowded?" she asked, half-eager and half-doubtful.

"We'll go in our *own* boat. Get an early start." Said Jack.

Someone said, "*Where* is the C.M.?"

Someone said, "In the kitchen, showing how to cut sandwiches in the least wasteful manner possible."

Someone said, "And who is *this* lovely young lady?"

"Felix Limekiller," she said.

"Ah, Mr. *Lime*killer! *Here* you are! You do not mind if I dance with this lovely young lady?"

"No, Sir, I don't. Felix, this is—"

The music began again and in the second or so before it swelled up to shake the walls again Jack heard the words, "Llewellyn Gonzaga Mc—" as the introduction dissolved into the dance: and they were off.

"See what I mean?"—Alex, into Jack's ear. "Everywhere. At one time."

"One does see what you mean."

One did indeed. Did one's car find itself tipped almost on its side in the famous Breakbone Gorge, who was that suddenly appearing with a winch-equipped truck? Who else but the tireless figure of Llewellyn Gonzaga McBride, the Queen's Chief Minister. Did an Indian, overwhelmed by piety and rum at the Feast of the Four Crowned Martyrs, give the well-known signs of adding via his own machete to the number of the martyrdom, who was *that* appearing from nowhere and, addressing *el Indio* in his own language, getting the machete away and tucking it under his own arm as though it had been an umbrella? Llewellyn Gonzaga McBride, the first (and so far the only) Chief Minister of British Hidalgo. Was who. Was who. Instances innumerable; "—and he's probably also, right now," said Alex, "in his office, working on the Budget."

"Something almost theological about it."

Make You Big and Strong, blared the record player.

"Something absolutely theological that this country even exists!" shouted Alex. His lips moved some more, but hearing him was now impossible. They shrugged; then, the two kitchen-women having come out to beam at "the funs," he and Jack swept them up and danced away with them.

And so now it was the next day, and Jack and Felix were out on the waves of the waters of Eden; they had for the time being anyway left the mangrove bluffs and the coral shoals and shallows behind them and were out in "the blue," in the deep water: deep being hereabouts a relative term. It was already somewhat hot in the sunlight but not boiling hot as it sometimes was. It was for that matter hot in the shade but in no wise uncomfortably hot. There was no longer exactly a wind, but there was a sort of languid breeze, and it blew now and then like a warm pat in the face. On the coast of British Hidalgo there was no surf, the surf beat against the Reef, about ten miles out. But the wind acted upon the water . . . or, now, the breeze did . . . and after each gust . . . and before the next . . . the water would surge slightly against the boat with a small soft slapping sound.

"What's May doing, these last few days," he asked, realizing that he had lately seen nothing of his lady's cousin and (until recently) traveling companion.

"Hmm. . . . Well, when did we last see her?"

Felix had a characteristic slight frown which enchanted him. Not near so much, of course, as her smile, or her laugh. Still. It was perhaps more intriguing than either. Because you never knew exactly what it meant. Oh, it never meant wrath, of course. Still. . . .

"Oh. Couple of *days* ago. In the New Chinese Grand Grotto."

" 'And Restaurant.' Yes . . . Was that the day we had the *chichen cashewseeds?* As the menu said?"

Something large in the water, to port. He glanced. Looked like a great ray-fish, slowly following the sun. "Uh. *No.* It was the day we had the *prypish potato.* As the menu said." Blue sky. Cotton clouds. Hot sun. Dry my white hair. "And she said, 'There is nothing *like* these exotic foods.' Remember?"

"Oh, that's what she *al*ways says."

There was a soft silence. "Reading her way through the National *Library,* I suppose. . . . I suppose we *could* have asked her to leave off for a day, and come out with us. . . ."

Cayes blurry to the port distance. Cayes blurry to the starboard distance. Behind, the low, low coast had sunk from sight. Of a sudden, also low, the cracked, hollow boom sang out; a fresh slap of wind struck his cheek.

But it was not followed by another.

"And I suppose she'd say that she could always go on a picnic, back in the Thousand Islands: but where else could she find the Compleat Planter's Almanac for 1800 through 1818?"

Felix had that slight frown, still, as she turned to face him. Or again.

"That *is* what she would say. That's *ex*actly what she'd say. How could *you* know?"

Looking into her eyes, the color of water flowing over mangrove bark, Limekiller opened his mouth. Realized that whatever he was about to say was bound to be the wrong thing to say. And a spirit touched his lips with a glowing coal. And he said something else, instead.

"Reef the mainsail, would you?"

She turned. A moment later, in an entirely different tone of voice, she asked, "One reef enough?"

"Just exactly enough."

And Skippy the Cat, in no wise resentful of his demotion, since Felix's arrival aboard, from first mate to supercargo, at that moment rubbed his off-white pelt against her aft leg. She bent down to pet him and to utter endearments. Next she said, "Do you know, Skippy, what pleased me so much last night? It was when Captain Jack said, '*our* boat.' Not '*my* boat.' But '*our* boat.' "

In a sudden up-flowing of joy, Captain Jack said, "*Well,* Skip, if you want to know what made *my* night, it was when First Mate Felix introduced herself to Chief Minister McBride as 'Felix Limekiller.' "

Skippy's comment was, "*Must* I put up with all this mush so early in the morning? *E*eyoo. Blech. —a little more scratching abaft the starboard ear, Biped. *Ahh. . . .*"

And then, for a white, nobody said anything at all, but everybody seemed very well-content.

They had been heading east to begin with (never *mind* about Marley), with a good east wind behind them, and this had gradually dropped . . . so gradually that, being blissful all together there in Eden, they hardly noticed. And, in fact, they were slow to notice when the wind shifted and began blowing right up their noses. The flapping of the dirty old sail brought the change to their attention. The boat was now quite out of sight of the low-lying mainland; talk about the Lowland *Sea* . . . or sing . . . .

But the boat had come in sight of some other point of land.

"There it is," Jack gestured to something small and bright, a house with the sun on it. "Galleons Caye . . . or whatever it's called."

She gave her ruddy hair a shake. "Whatever it's called, we don't seem to be going there. Or anywhere else."

"No . . . . No way to steer, this way. The boat is in irons."

Felix's face wrinkled. "In *what?*"

" 'In irons. . . .' Dead-assed still. As you've noticed."

Felix said that she preferred *in irons*. It sounded, she said, much more romantic. "Though kind of grim. Though."

He nodded. "It used to be very grim indeed, when this happened in the open sea. Well. Often. However. Time to start tacking."

They hauled the sails in, and, thus close-hauled on the starboard tack, the sloop proceeded to windward at a reasonable pace: they were heading, still, or, rather, again, out from land. But they were not steering toward Galleons Caye. Not yet. Neither were they heading dead away from it; they were away from it at an angle . . . but only at an angle. The jib had been loosed, and, with a "Ready—about," Jack put the tiller over, the boat crossed the wind, the mainsail came over, the jib slithered across, and she pulled it in on the other side by the other sheet: *sheet,* here, not meaning sail, but the line that trimmed it. This being a close-hauled tack, the jibsail did most of the work. The boat heeled over, then came back a bit, with the sea (seemingly, and perhaps, exactly) rising to meet it.

"*Ugh,*" said Felix, wincing at the shock.

"Pounding a bit."

She said she was glad it was only a bit.

"Not exactly a downhill run, is it?"

". . . not exactly . . . I guess. . . ."

After a bit he felt the wind shift; "Ready—*about,*" he ordered. He was to say it again. And again. . . .

The small bright building came nearer, after a while. It had never, after the first sighting, been out of sight at all. She asked, "Is it Gallard? Or is it Gall*i*ard?—Oh! I don't mean the damned *name!* of the *caye!*—I mean: *which* is the *dance?* You don't know, either? Well, I just had this picture. In my mind. Of those eighteenth century buccaneers dancing gaily out there, in the muck." He smiled. She returned the smile, though somewhat more faintly. And, through the many tacks, the building became many times larger; Jack said to himself that he was glad to see it become so, become nearer. But something was odd. Sophia. Something was very odd. Sophia. What? So*phi*a. Well, who and what was Sophia? A woman's name, of course. *Of course!* Well, actually a girl's. He had been just a boy. How old? Seventeen, maybe, all legs and nose. *I am in love with Sophia and any minute now I am going to see her and what a wonderful minute that will be,* his thoughts had run, there in the station in Victoria, he having come over on the ferry from Vancouver for to see her and no other reason, she coming down on the train from whatever ossified moss-covered hamlet near the Island's eastern shore where her family had been summering: and then he realized that he was not, after all, feeling wonderful: instantly she appeared and instantly he realized that he was not at all in love with her. After all.

—Oh, of course; not the same thing. He had never fancied himself in love with Galleons, Gallards, Galliards Caye: still . . . .

"But I can't *be* pregnant," Felix whispered, suddenly, almost fiercely.

He was less startled by the, to him, utterly unexpected prospect of fatherhood, than by the intensity of her voice.

"Would that be so terrible?" he asked.

"No." She said this less reluctantly than thoughtfully.

"Well, then why—"

"Because I can't *be*. Is why. I've already had my period: you ought to know; you haven't forgotten so soon, have you?"

No, he hadn't forgotten so soon. Yes, he ought to know; remembering his impatience. And all the rest of it. Slowly . . . almost, really, thinking out loud . . . he said, "Though I *have* heard—"

"—so have I," she said, quickly, interrupting him. "But it—I *feel* pregnant, and not in the way it was before."

Warm day. Why should he feel cold? "Have you been—" He stopped. What a question to ask, when she'd never mentioned a child. Or anything about—

"Yes," she said. She said, "Yes," as simply as she might have said it to, "Have you been in Bridgeport?" He said nothing more. Was he waiting for her to say more? If so, he waited in vain. A few staple thoughts ran through his mind. Abortion. Adoption. Miscarriage. The child is at home with her mother, aunt, sister; she was married young; divorced: it was none of his goddamned business.

It *was* none of his goddamned business.

Unless, of course, she were to feel it was. And, of course, she wasn't. Anyway, not right now. And so, right now, he had all the time in the world to think about this possible progeny. And the oddest thing he felt, as he thought about his feeling, was how odd it was that he didn't feel much of anything about it at all. *Was* she, then? Okay. Or: She after all *was*n't? Also okay.

"Maybe it's just that you're sort of sea-sick . . . all the pounding the boat's been doing . . . all these tacks, these winds—maybe."

She said, "Maybe."

Her voice was flat. She sounded not happy. She sounded not unhappy. She heard, she answered, but she wasn't really there, she was really somewhere else, a million miles away, far away somewhere in her own bloodstream: *So far, he could not call to her.*

So. Still. What. Ah. Of course. The wind. No wind of long fetch, this one. "Ready," he said, ". . . *about* . . ."

And meanwhile, what else was the boat doing? The boat was shipping water, was what else the boat was doing. And had to be pumped. And so he pumped it. The common pump he had learned from the local boatmen how to make, use and repair, and use again. It was part rubber, part leather, part wood, and had a long straight wooden handle and worked exclusively with an up-and-down motion, like the "plumber's friend," or plunger; it would probably never make the pages of *Yachting Magazine*, but, applied with vigor, it brought the intrusive water in a cold boiling froth up inside its long narrow rectangle of a case and out the spout and over the side. It beat bailing for sure: but though you expel Ocean with a plunge-pump, still, she will always return. Always. Always. Always.

That past winter an unexpected charter out to the Welshman's Cayes had left Limekiller with, all costs paid and reserves set aside for the inevitably lean and rainy days, with fifty dollars more than he had thought to have had: so he thought to buy a pair of binoculars . . . used, of course . . . eye-tracks don't wear the lenses out, was his thought . . . at Sitwell's Sports Shop, on "Artillery." (Sitwell was Honorary Vice-Consul for Iceland; "Do you get many Icelanders here?" was Jack's question. Said Sitwell, "I never gits any . . . but it saves me thirty-five dollars a year tax exemption."). However, on his way there he chanced to glance into a tiny optician's shop, and the small sign in the small window caught his eye. William Wilson Setsewayo Smith, it read, *Licentiate of the Worshipful Company of Spectacle-makers, London.* How could he resist a further look? And there, propped in a corner, was a, well, no, it really wasn't a telescope, it was an early nineteenth century or maybe even late eighteenth century Spy Glass, bound in only slightly-flaking light brown leather; the pricetag: *seventy-five dollars.* In he went, "Will you take fifty dollars for that?" The worshipful spectacle-maker was just about the same color. "I'll take forty-nine," he said, "and leff us boath have a nog of Governor Morgan Rum with the difference." After setting down his glass with an appreciative sigh, "May ye see rare sights with that," he said. "Best I be gittin bock to work now." There was a slight, a very slight prismatic effect, an effulgence, which was not met in modern optical glasses: but it served him well enough. Besides: sliding the thing in and out: such *fun!*

"See what you make of this," Limekiller said now, handing it over.

All morning long, and into the afternoon, that little yellow house danced in the distance before their eyes . . . advancing . . . receding . . . yellow . . . what was yellow, what had been yellow, and what had yellow been and stood for? "*—that fellow/ in Austrian yellow,*" no, no, certainly not Joyce; "*In the porch of my printing institute/The poor and deserving prostitute/Every night plays catch-as-catch-can/With her tight-breeched British artilleryman—*" How ridiculous; they, Jack and Felix, they weren't exiles, they were travelers. Just traveling and raveling.—Ah yes. Ah. Yes. Yellow was the color of the old quarantine flag. Flags. Odd thought. Infection. Taint. (And a lot of use that thought was, too.) And, ah, and equally inapplicable, the yellow passport of Imperial Russia for the exclusive use of prostitutes: not for foreign travel, no, a sort of ID: "internal passport." Bad joke, if so intended. *This imperial government has fallen* (old Prince Lvov, first premier of the Provisional Government which took its place) *because history has not known of a government more cruel and more corrupt. . . .* But history was to get to know. *A?* Plenty.) Yella Isabella. Wouldn't change her undies till Ghent was relieved; Ghent held put for *how* long? *Was* it Ghent? Was it Gallards, Gall*i*ards, Galleons, or—Isabella not of Spain but of Austria, *there* we *go* again. . . .

The little yellow house danced and blurred. Must be Major Deak's house. Whoever Major Deak was. Had the house been quite finished? Wasn't part of a framework of a second story visible there? Just a few timbers. Something odd and yet familiar about it . . . *them.* . . . Also, somehow: not nice. Some shapes, some angles, somehow not sympatico . . . or whatever the hell. Heat haze. Heat fever? Wasn't *that* hot. The spy glass was *old.* . . .

"Oh, Jack, I don't like it," she said, low-voiced. So. Felix felt it too. Whatever the "it" of it was, this time. Or perhaps it was the other way round. Perhaps not part of a framework of a house-yet-to-be, but of a house-which-once-was. Maybe the last remnants of an upper story . . . either unfinished or torn off in some hurricane or bayama or other wind of, *really,* long fetch. Maybe it was after all the *wind* like the squalid *sirroco,* the wretch *mistral,* or *fehm,* which was bothering Felix, like the *khamsin* which blew for fifty dreadful days, they say that under the old Ottoman Turkish law anyone who killed a spouse would be acquitted if the *khamsin* had been blowing for even a month. . . . But: here: now: no: only a matter of hours . . . or, not so long as that, surely the wind had been a far-better feeling wind, until . . . well, long minutes . . . so: *no.*

So, then, what?

Not every building in this country (not so much forgotten by the rest of the world as to it unknown), not every one afflicted by hurricanes, tempest-torn, had been rebuilt, even ashore. Limekiller passed one such each day in King Town, squashed almost into a parallelogram, but still inhabited. Others. Plenty of others. So no big sweat that old Major Deak (and why "*old*"? He could be a major and yet young, na true?) had not gotten around to— Flaps of wallpaper flapped and dangled and flew about in the breeze, the hot, dry, cold, sticky breeze. *Suddenly:* no breeze *here,* though. *Was.* But not *now.* Over *there.* . . .

*Wall*paper? Out on the *Cayes?* Not very damned likely . . . curtains, *yes,* rags of curtains—part of a window frame with parts of the curtains still dangling—

"I bet that's Alex," she said, very suddenly.

He held the glass. He squinted. Maybe those were, yes of course those were. People. But— "You've got better eyes than I, I guess. *I* can't make out Alex."

"Oh," she said, easily, "neither can I. Make him *out.* But the one on the end, I mean, somehow he just *seems* like Alex."

Their eyes met. Instantly he knew that if he said a single word about Alex, she would say at least a single word about May. And wouldn't *that* be silly? What a day this had turned out to be.

Water flowing over mangrove bark. . . .

The traps we dig for ourselves.

"It looks," she said, as though judiciously, and as though judiciously changing the subject, "it looks as there must be another house on that caye, with the second story sort of ruined, you know what I mean? And from this *dis*tance, at a certain *an*gle, it's sort of as though the top of that one is sort of superimposed onto the other one. The yellow one. If you see what I mean. . . ."

"I do see. Yes."

But later, once they'd gone ashore, and thought to ask, they were told, no such thing. Nothing like that. One caye. One house.

The caye. Mangrove bluffs. Shallows. Looking down, in some places, so clear, almost one could lean over and touch the negrohead coral, and the garfish. The insufferable wind. When there was wind. And yet, now, smoke coiling from cigarettes and scarcely rising. *Much* wind, coming out . . . but now, here at last, the air was dull above the mangrove bluff and reclaimed land, the sky was now slate-colored; even, half-turning, the color of the sea had changed, too.

"It seems somehow *dead* here," she murmured, low-voiced, as they put ashore. It did. Haunted. Oppressive.

But now there was little time for such thought.

They were no longer alone.

Loud good cheer.

"What *took* you so long?"

"Had to make many tacks."

"Thought you'd *never* get here! Well! Have a drink!"

"Why didn't you come in the *launch?*" (Limekiller to himself: Because it's Alex Brant's launch. Is why. And was shocked to find he'd thought so.)

"*Glad* to see you! Glad to *see* you!"

"Here's a bottle of beer for each of you, then"—this was Neville (*English* Neville. There was not, really, any Norwegian Neville) producing the beer with an air of innocent sinfulness possible only to someone raised by a Baptist grandparent. Neville had a thin blond body and a thin blond beard.

"Felix! Gyel! Me wait-wait-wait fah you! Fret-fret-fret, may-*be* you hahv frock nice-ah dan mine! And what I see? Nutting like dot! Dungah-*ree!* What! Nicholine?"—This was Adah, Noddy's lady. Nicholine was Neville's girlfriend. Nicholine's comment, couched in the form of a proverb, and said, in a low-quick mutter, was "Piggy play dead fih cotch corby live." Nicholine was short and squat, and Nicholine was jealous. Adah threw back her head, laughed her friend's comment into the air, and so, away: then she passed her hands over her lime-green-nylon-covered hips. Winked at Felix. At Jack. They did not wink at each other.

Alex strolled up, casual and easy. "Come on over to the house and meet the official host. Well, we *are* paying him for the use of the place for the day. But he *is* our host. Adds class. —Some of us were worried, you being so long getting here. I told them, no sweat. Not to worry." A smile for Felix.

Noddy said, "Yes, come along. You've got quite a lot of good drinking to catch up on." Noddy was portly and ginger-moustached and learned and cheerful . . . except when you were trying to crash his party. Which was not now. There were others who had come strolling out to meet them, to help with the tying up. To bring drinks. Just In Case. The Honorable Somerset Summerville, Secretary to Government, and a not-bad-poet in his own right and on his own time, was there. So was his wife. ("Yes," the Honorable was now and then heard to say, "I was the typical Colored Colonial student in London, and so, typically, I married my landlady's daughter . . . well . . . actually . . . *grand*daughter . . .!" And, actually, he had; the Dowager Lady Blenkinson did not of course let lodgings: she owned the whole *street*. And the next one. And the next one. "—and, as my wife already was an Honorable, why, I had no choice but to become one, too!" His wife showed neither amusement nor annoyance; she was wearing khakies, and was the authority on the orchids of the Hidalgo Littoral.). Also present was Ethelred Edwards, a master adzeman at Nahum's boatyard, and *his* wife—she and the Hon. Mrs. Summerville were the only wives at the party (or picnic) . . . or, at any rate, the only women who had been "married in church" to the men with whom they were currently affiliated. British Hidalgo was strong on being married in church. Divorce, however, was something else altogether. It was difficult. It was expensive. And it was, finally, irrelevant.

It was unlikely that people from classes as diverse as Nicholine and Adah, the Summervilles, and the Edwardses would ever, in King Town, be at the same social gizzmadoo. But foreigners, somehow, or, anyway certainly some of them, were outside the peripheries of caste. And could act as a catalyst. Or whatever.

They walked to the yellow house along a sort of boardwalk. "What do you think of the looks of the land?" asked Alex. Both Jack and Felix said, almost together, that it "looked funny." Brant nodded. "Just step on it," he suggested. "After they cut down the mangrove, they burned it off, and—well, just step on it. Go ahead. Won't bite you." Somewhat gingerly, the newcomers did. The signs of the burning-off were still visible, and it felt soggy beneath their feet. It, in fact, quivered. The effect was somewhat unsettling; Jack and Felix were glad to step back onto the boards.

"It will dry out, eventually . . . and then, to help it out, they'll fill it with sand and with pipeshank. Those vertical planks you see will be helping it drain. It *was* dryer, once, the men have found signs that people had lived here before . . . old nails . . . old pieces of timber . . . old bones . . . " he rolled his eyes toward Felix, Felix shuddered, Alex laughed. "Old turtle bones. Rare and protected now, when I'm not catching them . . . they used to be common as fish."

Rare? increasingly so. Expensive . . . accordingly. Protected? somewhat. Alex . . . somehow . . . was never caught catching them in legally protected areas, so it followed . . . didn't it? that he had caught them in legally *un*protected areas. And sold them . . . when he sold them . . . at great prices to such places as that stately old guest house the Queen Adelaide, and to the Empire Hotel and the Tropicalia Inn. Felix, perhaps uncomfortable about the turtles, asked if there were any interesting mammals. ". . . on Gallans or Galliard or whatever its name?"

The caye, whatever its name, probably had no mammals at all except perhaps for bats which perhaps ate the silver-pale hog-plum or the pale yellow governor-plum. But it hospitted the pelican, locally called the stork, which, bill empty, it did resemble. The insect-like hummingbird was there, though not in great numbers, for there were not many nectar-yielding flowering plants on that sombre islet. Plovers and sandpipers sometimes strolled the small stretch of strand and sand, and the shrieking gull and the tern were sometimes there . . . and the carrion-buzzard ("the corby") furtively patrolled the place with its ugly croak and its filthy feathers. The dead air weighed them all down.

The newcomers rounded the angle of the boardwalk, the yellow house stood there on stilts before them, one story in all, and, from that first glance, one which led you in through the open door and came to a quick conclusion: one room in all.

Someone was coming toward them, walking very slowly. Said the Honorable Somerset, "And here is our host." Jack felt something like instant recognition upon seeing Major Deak, and yet he knew he'd never seen him before . . . he seemed actually a giant tortoise walking upright,—the convex back, the waving flipperlike arms and hands, the head out-thrust from the loose collar at almost a right angle, the face here wrinkled and there divided into platelets, the absence of head or facial hair. The eyes lacked alike the clearness of youth and the milkiness of age; the eyes (Limekiller concluded) the eyes looked *sick*. He heard, in his inner ear, his own voice saying, You're wrong. And, a second later, realized that he'd been replying to something not addressed to himself . . . something murmured back there a moment ago between Edwards and his wife.

De Major looking ageable.

Yes, mon, ahnd aging fahst.

But it was not age. The cayes were commonly considered to be of a healthier air than that of King Town; often Limekiller, comparing the fresh winds out on the islets to the soggy smells of the badly drained capital, had agreed. But clearly the air here was doing Major Deak no good . . . and, if today's dead-sullen calm and . . . the phrase rose up in his mind and silently burst like a bubble of gas . . . and *bad vibes* . . . were typical . . . he did not finish the thought. He was being introduced, he had to speak.

"How are you, sir?"

And Major Deak, alas, proceeded to *tell* him. ". . . thought I was choking, strangling . . . doctor finds no evidence of asthma or emphysema . . . *can't* go elsewhere to live," he said, slowly moving his head from side to side, as though Limekiller had urged him to move on. ". . . all my savings here . . . planned to add a few rooms . . . receive a few people, retired people . . . paying guests . . . labor troubles . . . can't seem to catch my breath for long . . . thought that in a place with underemployment there'd be no problem hiring workpeople, but . . . nothing seems to get *done*. . . . eating up my capital . . . pension a trifle . . . say that from today on for a *month* nobody will do a job of work . . . would have retired in the Golconda Colony but the fanatics have gained control there. . . ."

There was one word which, Jack thought, described the man's state. *Misery*.

Upstairs, surprisingly, the air was by far less dead. It was not only to discourage Critturs that this house, like so many in the country, was built on stilts: the chief purpose was to catch the wind. And it caught it. But the wind did not stay caught. And someone else was upstairs, as though waiting for them. Stickney Forster.

Stickney Forster was a Member of the Bar, and by now the only actively practicing White member. Those who liked him said, "Ah very clever mahn, he went to the Oxford College, you know." Those who did not like him said that if he had ever been to Oxford it was only to use the toilet. "That Limey bahstard," they called him. Although on this occasion he was not in his black robe and white tie and wig, Jack recognized him at once, had long been quietly amused by his having once said, "I have placed in my will that on my tombstone it should read, *Father of the Illegitimate Children's Sustentation Act,* being the shortest Act in the Law Code. Do you know it? It reads in its entirely, *The Illegitimate Children's Sustentation Act shall follow in every detail the provisions of the Legitimate Children's Sustentation Act*. Caused a few grumbles, I can tell you, fat lot I care, but it makes sure that no 'outside' child is going to go raggedy-arsed while his half-sibs are fully-clothed just because their parents were 'married in church.' " *Married in church* and *An outside child,* Jack knew the words well, as they often appeared in casual conversation in British Hidalgo; B.H. being, he had often thought, the one country he knew of in which absolute adherence to the old-time religion went hand in hand with absolute heterosexual freedom. (There was as yet nothing like a "Gay Rights" Movement in British Hidalgo; very very rarely was the matter even mentioned, and then usually in a very tight-lipped line in the official *Gazette:* Sixteen months in gaol for having committed the crime against nature).

However . . . .

Outside child . . . .

Married in church . . . .

These phrases now restored to the top-level of his mind, Jack now began to think about them and about their implications; and, whilst somebody's record-player shrieked loud good times and loud bad music, think of them he did. He lacked the langorous tropical attitude toward carnal congress and parturition and the sustentation of children: and so, he was sure, did Felix. There was no likelihood that she would cut cane in the field till her time arrived and then retire behind a clump of trees, easily to give birth to the offspring of their love. There was no likelihood that Jack would simply give her what he chanced to have in his pockets and inform her that if rations grew scarce his great-aunt in Ladysmith Street would always have an extra plantain or an extra banana. And, although *Grandy* was always willing and indeed more than willing to take in the tot, Felix did not have a *Grandy* in the Colony, and neither did Jack, and in the colder climates hearts were at least in this respect less warm. Which left what? The choice. Abortion? And, if not . . . marriage.

In short, he was perhaps now being obliged to ask himself if he would rather slay the baby in her belly or at long last Settle Down and bend his sunburned neck beneath the yoke. "Shandy*gaff*? Shandy*gaff*?" this was Noddy asking, and, taking some murmur or motion for Yes, he stuck a glass in Jack's hand and simultaneously and deftly, poured out half a bottle of Coca-Cola and half a bottle of Tennant's Milk Stout (imported, and well worth the importation). Jack quaffed deeply. "Noddy, thank you," he said. "Usually I don't care for fantods in my drink, but this one is just great." Noddy made a brief mock-bow, murmured something about Native Arts and Crafts, mimed that he would pour another, shook his head briefly at Jack's No; was off. Mr. J.L.L. asked, "Hey, Felix, do you want," her eyes turned away the exact second that they met his, and she rose from the rough bench and moved off. A prey once again to the Dismals, Jack said, "a drink," in a low, helpless voice. Knew as well as he knew anything that if he did not follow after her he would later be furiously accused of neglect; that if he did follow after her, she would turn on him like a cornered wildcat, with a forced-out, "Don't *fol*low me!" Why, with all the Hazards of the World, did people feel the need to devise new ones? The heavy air produced no answer. Jack decided he would pay his respects to the nominal host, a matter at which she would perhaps decide she need not resent; and, the second he saw her, call out an invitation to be introduced to the man. It would not be correct to say that he failed to meet Deak's eye, or that he listened with half an ear; but his attention was not altogether with it.

Just at the moment, however, Major Deak was talking to the two Honorables and Jack did not care to horn in. He was too well-bred for one thing, and for another he knew not but that the major as principal local landlord might not still exercise medieval powers—say, "the *alcalde* jurisdiction" or pervoynter in uccage and flemage, say, and order him to be staked out on the foreshore at Sandy Caye until two tides should have flowed and ebbed—and anyway a voice in his ear murmured, "Jock" and he turned to fight.

"It's not *Jock*, it's—ah, Stickney!" They shook hands, Limekiller explaining that he didn't wish to be *Jock* to anyone who wanted to trot out a sporranful of old Scotchman jokes, but, "and what brings you here? didn't know you were a party-goer. . . ?"

"Came to see Judge Deak, Major Deak, that is, my older brother knew him well when John Deak was a judge in Golconda Colony and Richard was the Assistant Colonial Secretary. They both went back into the Army during the War, John became a major and Richard became dead; awfully pretty woman, that, you ugly young troll, ah youth! ah woe, the fleeting hours!" Very deftly did Stickney Forster give Jack all the information needed, and then turn the conversation so as to leave no room for feeling a formal need to express regret on the long ago death of someone he had never till now heard of, which expression could be nothing but hypocrisy, or, as Dr. Johnson called it, cant (Sir, clear your mind of cant!). "Deftly," yes. Part of being a gentleman, and having nothing to do with money, position, and a command of the pickle forks. Jack envied.

Major Deak moved off and the Honorable Mrs. Whatsis stopped rummaging in her shoulder-bag or was it a knapsack, it looked roomy enough and durable enough to pack a waree or a wild bush hog in, assuming it to have been cleaned and quartered and cut up into chops, chines, and hams. The Black Arawack were very fond of the cheaper cuts of pig, referring to their favorite cuts as *pigtaili* and *pigsnoutu*. But neither they nor those were present. "Don't know what I'm looking for," she murmured. "Yes, I *do*. But it's not in *here*. Somerset!" she adjured her husband, who looked up with a yes-my-dear expression on his lean and naturally tan face. "I think perhaps you ought to tell these people what you were telling me about the caye . . . you do recall, don't you? the night after Sir Joshua prorogued the Assembly and we discovered that Mrs. Hodkins had stolen the cheese again. The *caye,* Somerset!" and, leaving her Honorable husband neither time nor chance to reply, swept on. "She's a good housekeeper, a fine cook, and an absolutely splendid laundress, my sister Alice once compared her to Queen Elizabeth's Silk Woman, of course one understands the *first* Elizabeth, I do think that was *so* squalid of the King of Spain to have kept a spy in the Virgin Queen's laundry to see if she were still capable of having children. But she does *'tote'* as the Americans say. Somerset?"

Limekiller, slightly dazed, nevertheless understood that it was not the first Elizabeth who had chosen to make off with the cheese. The Honorable Mrs. did not often speak at length, socially, but when she did, she *spoke.*

The Honorable Minister to Government carefully put his glass down. He gave a glance over his shoulder. "Where is Major— Ah. Down there. I am not quite sure that I wish him to hear this. Of course he must be told eventually. Well. What I said to my wife is this. This present attempt to develop this caye is not the first, you know. No, it is not. The United National Investment Association—what? Oh, yes, one of the Harrisite groups, remarkable man, Aurelius Harris, pity that those remarkably large hands were so remarkably sticky—mm, yes, the UNIA had bought this caye from the Crown, cash down, and planned to build an hotel here; my uncle George was one of the board of directors, a remarkable farseeing man, foresaw the tourist possibilities of such a place, and it was he who told my father about what they found. I was just a youngster at the time, but naturally I was all ears. The story seems to have quite faded away, but *I* well remember it, yes. . . ."

Jack, either still dazed or dazed again, trying hard to make the connection between Queen Elizabeth I and Aurelius Harris, of whom he had barely heard; Limekiller wondered if the Honorable Lady had learned discursiveness from the Honorable Minister, or if it had been the other way around, or if a mutual tendency had first attracted them to each other. *Be that as it may* . . . .

Time: the late Nineteen Twenties. *Scene*: Galliards or whatever name Caye. *Cast of Characters*: A band of men, Nationals, delving and digging with shovels and spades and buckets in the mud and muck of the quaking soil, in the partially dried and partially drying soil, in the wet and mucky and boggy soil, had come across some heavy timbers. What kind? Some said, teak. Yes: *teak*. Despite a total absence of elephants, teak did grow in the hospitable soil of what was once called His Majesty's Settlement of Woodcutters on the Bay of Hidalgo. Hard to cut, teak? Damnably hard to cut, teak. But that didn't mean that they didn't cut it. Teak. Others said that the timbers were mahogany. Would mahogany have been brought over from the mainland to a "pure mangrove bluff," as these cayes were called? Surely not to make furniture? No. Surely not to build a boat, for example? Nothing surely about it. For building purposes the wood of choice hereabouts had always been pine, the tropical hardwood pine. In fact, it was so choice, that one could not always obtain it. Jack well recalled a local builder of rowboats and skiffs telling him that he had gone looking for boat wood, and, "Wanted *pine*, you know, mahn: cou'n't git it. Had to take mahogany," a sad shake of the head. And, for that matter, he well knew that when Lemuel Cracovius the dentist had built a second house along the Spanish River he had built it out of mahogany, that being at the time cheaper than pine, European market had been depressed; had built the entire cottage out of mahogany, Lemuel: and then he had painted it green. *Protective coloration, John,* his only explanation.

"Well, it's well known that wood kept under water or anyway well wet," said the Honorable, making gestures to his Lady Wife, who delved into her dittybag and came out with a pipe and a pouch of tobacco and proceeded to fill the pipe as her lord talked on; "will keep very much better than wood which is seasoned dry. So it was no surprise that the timbers gave every evidence of being very old . . . the axe-marks and adze-marks had not been made by any modern tools, they saw that at once. Thank you, my dear." He put the filled pipe between his teeth while she struck a large wooden "Swede's match," as they were locally called (on the Prairies they were called "farmer matches"; merely proves that there were a lot of Swedes farming on the Prairies; nothing new about that) and a puff of smoke from a pipe tobacco which had never been cured or blended by the Indians (whose slash-and-burn farmings were industriously ruining the slopes of the Mayan Mountains) filled the room with its delicious scent.

And they had puzzled over the timbers, their shapes and purpose, and in a few moments realized what they were. Puff. Puff. Puff.

And the warm wind seemed to echo: puff . . . puff . . . puff . . .

"And what were they?" Felix could not wait, needs must ask.

"Don't know if you've ever wondered, puff," the Honorable Minister said, "what the right name of this caye *is*, puff, puff."

"*Ne*ver gave it a thought," she said, mendaciously. "Gal something, isn't it?"

How those lovely lips could lie!—Jack's admiring thought.

The clouds of Three Grommets Cut Shag, or was it Lord Tweedweevil's Prime Shaved Plug, filled the room. " 'Gal something,' just so. Galliards, Gallards, Gallants, Galleons, Gal-this and Gal-that. Eh? What, Mr. Brant? 'Gal Cut and Run?' Ah, but that is on the Old Belinda River. Well, not to make a very long matter of it, puff, puff, the timbers fitted very neatly into an old engine of execution, that is to say, a gibbet, or in other words, a—"

And Jack and Felix in one gust of breath cried out, "*Gallows!*"

The matter of *why* the Gal had Cut and Run, fascinating though it probably was, and for that matter *who* the Gal was, must needs wait another occasion, as Sheherazade doubtless told the sultan as he sipped his cup of cawwa tinged with ambergrise through his musky-scented moustache. "Uncle George realized at once that this was *Gallows* Caye and that the timbers were those of *the* gallows, and nought else. They thought of burning them, but they were too damp. So they just reburied them again until they could think of something else, because naturally they didn't wish the story to get out ("Naturally!") or the workmen would have downed tools at once. And no one would have stopped at the hotel. And in fact the work on the building scheme alas went no further because the Slump, the Depression, you know, simply destroyed the foreign mahogany market and eventually the caye was sold for half the purchase price to Merchant Henricus Deak who didn't really want it and did nothing with it whatsoever, and after he died I believe it was the Grasshopper Bank in London paid the taxes for oh donkey's years. Then came forth from over the seas Major John Deak, formerly Judge Deak: nephew, isn't he?"

"Cousin," said Stickney Forster. Briefly.

Briefly. And everyone had time to think thoughts. Puff . . . puff . . . puff . . . —How long did or had the gallows tree remained there? "Too long by far. Timber's always been cheap here . . . too cheap, you know . . . and it was even cheaper back then. No reason to dismantle the damned engine," he used the word in an archaic meaning without hesitation but not without emphasis; "and bring the baulks and beams back, bring them anywhere for that matter—there was after all another gallows in King Town—so here it stayed, tainting the very sky, as you might say, till down they fell. Did anyone topple them? I doubt it. Probably tumbled down in some strong wind, a wind of long fetch . . . not one of hurricane strength, else the pieces would've been flung afar. . . ."

The few pieces of exotic furniture, a painting showing a jungle scene, similar to but not the same as the local "bush," brassware and other foreign finery, scarcely filled or disguised the bareness of the room; and through the open doors on each side the breeze blew fitfully but without interruption for very long. Sounds of gaiety accompanied at times by the tunes from Alex Brant's gramophone, snatches of loud amused conversation, came to them in fits and snatches; from time to time the drone of Deak's monologue into the ears of, by the murmur of an occasional comment, good-natured Neville. Felix asked, "But what do you mean, 'another gallows in King Town'? If there was one there, why did they have another one here?"

Ah, said the Honorable (with a wave of the by now puffed-out pipe), ah, *that* was another story. "My uncle George became interested in the matter and he copied an account of it out of some annal or archive and I made a copy of his copy and I placed it in that book, the yellow one there on the shelf between the Bible and the Dictionary, which I lent to Major Deak with the intention that he should read it as a sort of preparation of the, well, ha ha, no, not for the Gospel; you know Eusebius, do you—" "*Somerset!*" "Mmm, yes, my dear; preparation for knowing the background of the—but I suppose he hasn't read it, eh?"

"He hasn't read it." —Stickney Forster. Still brief.

"Mm. Well, I thought the book might anyway interest him, like most men I assume that if a book interests *me,* it must interest *others,* and—"

Jack knew exactly what the man meant, and, knowing that the man spent very long hours trying to prepare such arid items as A BILL to ascertain that the SEWERS and DRAINS of the Municipality of KING TOWN, as set forth in Sanitary Act 3317, Schedule B, Article 6C of the 18th April, 1959, be hereby AMENDED, as follows; so that the National Assembly might prevent being up to its nostrils in SLUDGE: whereas the Members of the Assembly would much, much rather have been adopting resolutions condemning the Repressive Regime of Zambazunga—or, better yet, voting to adjourn early to see the Middle Schools cricket game; Jack, knowing this, felt a burst of sympathy for the Honorable Minister for Government's rambling away on other subjects. "What book is *that,* Sir?" he asked.

"It is a copy of the Planter's Annual for 1810."

It was absolutely astonishing how all at once Jack's eyes and Felix's eyes were locked into each other's gaze; and in hers he read with alas all too absolute certainty the charge that by knowing that May was fascinated by that series of historical volumes he was somehow convicted of being privy to some passion between May and himself—a passion of which he knew himself utterly innocent. He had never given May any more than a cousinly kiss; May was sweet in her own dry, acerbic way; her face was a plate of pudding with just enough nose to hold her eyeglasses up, and her blouse concealed no more curves than would hospit a pair of doorknobs; all this was beside the point, the point being that

(a) he had perhaps gat Felix with child when she would probably rather not be gat, and (b) at a time when he had a felonious intuition of May's preferred taste in historical reading matter. Surely Queen Elizabeth, the *High and Mighty Prince, Elizabeth,* daughter of Henry VIII, "that vile monster," as Who?-had called him, would have sent any man to The Tower on just such a charge. And Felicia Ann Fox, the sole true love of John Lutwidge Limekiller's life and perhaps the bearer of his baby beneath her beating heart was now staring at him with a blazing gaze which seemed to accuse him of every crime and conceivable offense from masturbation to simony: and defying him to have any expression upon his face or even to drop his eyes.

"If it weren't for the breeze I couldn't tolerate being out here," said the Honorable Mrs.; *"and I don't much like the breeze."*

Now was heard from a different quarter a puffing and a huffing which was neither the offending breeze nor the Honorable's pipe. Major Deak was slowly lifting his large tortoise's body up the shallow steps from the sand-filled yard to the house, with nice Neville at one elbow. ". . . and horrid dreams," the Major was saying, between gasps. "Thought I was choking or strangling . . . but doctor finds no sign of asthma or emphysema . . . can't *live* here," he sank into the chair which Jack vacated, "and can't live elsewhere." He paid no attention as Felix, who had taken the yellow book from its shelf, proceeded to drop it, fumbled picking it off the floor, quite twisting herself around, got it at last, replaced it. "For Christ's sake pour me a drink, Stickney. . . ."

Limekiller, glad to be free of that freezing gaze, bent over the bottles. "Whiskey, Major? he asked, solicitously. "Water? Soda?" There was no ice.

For the first time Deak gave him the benefit of his attention. "Whiskey?" he demanded. "*Whiskey?* Before the sunset gun? *Cer*tainly not. Gin and tonic, Stickney." Limekiller, fairly crushed, yielded his place at the bar.

Squatting peacefully in the shade as she smoked her pipe, a middle-aged Arawack woman had given Jack a brief nod; he supposed she was the housekeeper. The floor here must have certainly been swept, for the Arawack were notoriously vigorous sweepers; but sand had been tracked inside, and the breeze, that same breeze which had been so reluctant to waft the *Sacharissa* along with any speed at all, now blew the sand in little swirls and eddies. "I'd thought to retire here," Major Deak, perhaps none the better for his deep sip of Mother's Ruin (and perhaps none the worse: he did not, somehow, have the look of a drinkard), continued his plaint. "Thought to put up a house and several cottages, take in a few congenial paying guests. The only solid place on the caye is under this house, this half-built house. Got to *pave* the rest of the place, in effect, clear off the mangrove, which I can't even sell, market for tanbark is sated, not to say cloyed; clear off the mangrove, box in the bog and fill it with sand like a kiddies' sand box . . . half the time when we've dumped

I don't know how many boatloads of sand, I find that the plot *was*n't boxed in at all, and the sand just slips away. 'Cottages'? Can't even seem to get this house finished, let alone cottages. Can't hire proper workmen, they don't want to work out on the caye, don't want to stay overnight, they come late and leave early, collect their wages and are gone till they're spent, demand advances, don't return to earn them back, steal tools," the drone went on. Limekiller had little doubt that there was much to complain. Bayfolk would work hard, would work very hard indeed . . . but they much preferred to work their hard work in King *Town,* the ancient capital which was London, Paris, Rome, and Jerusalem to them. Away from King Town and its incessant cheerful noise, away from the dram-shops with their convivial ten-cent glasses of low-proof local rum and local water, away from the chance to lime the passing women and girls, away from the continuous opportunity to break the monotony of labor with a purchase from passing vendors of fried conch-flitter or a handful of peanuts or a cluster of fibrous pocono-boy nuts; away from all this and from the very bumboats gliding along the Foreshore or the canals, the Bayman tended to wilt and to lose interest. All this was nothing new to Jack. Nor did Deak seem at all the type to toil alongside his workmen and cheer them up with a jest or a quip.

And he certainly did not look as though a jest or a quip would cheer *him* up. At all. And as for his very evident bad health, Jack, in the words of the song, was not a qualified physician and did not want to give the decision. Perhaps the man had picked up one of the multitude of little-known bugs which added to the White Man's Burden . . . , or for that matter, the Black and Brown. Whoever. Or, if a psychosomatic illness, well, a perforated ulcer, for example, caused by worry, was a hole in the stomach just as much as a hole in the stomach *not* caused by worry. Or, putting it another way, three and three equals six and so does four plus two equals six and so five and—

"*Oh, I works fih Whitemon fih* money," sang someone in the cheerful yard, "*ahn I geeves eet to my* honey," and at once Nora or was it Gwendolyn or Eva, cried out in a cheerful shriek, "You naw geeve eet to *me!*" Much laughter. The singer shouted "What I *does* geeve you, gyel? Eef you no like eet, senn eet bock!" Much, *much* laughter.

"Did *you* have much trouble getting here today?" was Jack's question to Stickney Forster.

"No. None. We've a good little engine in the boat. One of yours, you know, Johnson."

Perhaps not every boat motor in the waters of "the Colony" was a Johnson-Evinrude, but *Johnson,* in Hidalgo-English—or anyway, in Baytalk—was *the* word for an outboard engine. "Ah, you came by motorboat," said Jack, nodding.

"Yes. You not? No, I see not. I well remember, on my old boat, sometimes trying to avoid this caye, yet it keeps coming back into sight. And sometimes, try as one will, it seems that one can hardly get here at all: the winds require one to tack back and forth. Well, on certain days. And the old people, *de w'old people,*" he slipped into Baytalk, not at all in mockery but as though to reinforce his own statement; "*They* used to say, those days are the anniversaries of hangings." Having said this, in a tone slightly that of saying something in confidence, Stickney Forster seemed rather resentful at having said it. He gave a covert look at Major ("Judge") Deak. Who had not seemed to hear it, was studying his gin. It was, after all, *his* gin; was he perhaps recollecting the sign over the cellar in Hogarth's Gin Line engraving . . . *Drunk for a penny. . . . Dead drunk for two pence. . . . Clean Straw for nothing. . .* ? George IV brand gin cost a deal more than a penny.

But someone else had heard it. Felix removed her water-over-mangrove-bark-dark gaze from Limekiller's eyes (but what have I *done?* he cried in his heart; she did not seem to have heard it), and turned to—almost *on*—Stickney Forster. "You still hang people here, then?" she asked.

Stickney Forster seemed, suddenly, or once again, a very model of a model English gentleman. With no trace of the old colonial or modern North American tones which had overlaid his accent previously, he said, "Yes . . . I'm afraid we do . . . you know. . . ."

"Yes . . . I'm afraid I do know. But isn't that a very terrible thing to do?"

As an attorney, either for the Crown or in private practice, he was usually capable of speaking crisply and succinctly. Now? Not. "Hm, well, still, hm, you know, I don't know," he said, brushing back the tip of his auburn moustache with the tip of his auburn finger, and sounding almost as if he had determined to burlesque himself. "I don't know, you know. About that. Not so sure. About that. You know."

"No," said Felix, suddenly as calm as the eye of a hurricane. "I *don't* know. Explain it to me."

Stickney concentrated. Cleared his throat. "*Well.* You are from The States, I take it." "You may." "Well, you see. Now you must be familiar with at least one large city in The States. Hmm. Ah, Chic*ag*o. You've bean in Chicago?" Felix had been in Chicago. "Well. There you are."

"I am *where?"*

Clearly she was going to give him no help at all. He made a long, slow motion with his long, slow hand, tawny from the tropic sun. Made up his mind to make his point. "Well. In which place do you feel safer? At night, I mean?"

Felix was hostile. But, whether poor or not, she was honest. "Here," she said.

He nodded. "Exactly so. And do you know why? Because of Murderers. Beg pardon. But you do let them get away with murder there. Perhaps what you call 'a good lawyer' gets them off. If not, what then? Found guilty? Appeal. Appeals. Chap wears the courts out, often. Evidence grows stale. New trial? Witnesses have died. Or grown forgetful. Or reluctant. Chap often walks away free. *Or*. Guilty? *No* new trial? 'Life imprisonment'? Out on the streets in six years. Perhaps does it *again.*

"You see. . . .

"Here . . . no.

"*Ev*idence. *Tes*timony. *Guil*ty. *Sen*tenced. Three weeks *lat*er: *Dead,* you know. Result? *Very* few murders." He paused a moment, said, "You *see. . . .*"

Felix, it was clear, *did* see. But still didn't like what she saw. After a moment she murmured, "A twelve-year-old boy for stealing a pearl-handled penknife?"

"Ahh—" Stickney's groan was deep in his throat. "*Ter*rible. I quite agree. *Two hundred years ago.* Time when George Washington owned slaves. When *free Negroes* owned slaves. . . ."

There was silence. Limekiller stared at the flaccid sea. Then Major Deak's sick eyes drooped. Blinked. Opened wider. "Freshen your drinks?" he asked. "Freshen mine, Stickney, a good chap."

More George IV gin (and less tonic) added to his glass, Deak, who had listened absolutely silently to Stickney Forster, now said, with the by now familiar breath-breaks and gasps and sighs, "During my years as District Judge I had to pass sentence of death on between I suppose oh twenty to thirty men. Only one woman." A voice not his: "*Ohhh?*" A gasp. His. Then, "Mmm. First she killed her baby because child didn't look like her husband. Then killed her husband. Too." A gulp of air.

Outside, someone shouted, "Dahnce, everybody? Dahnce? *Dahnce!*"

The joviality note at once rose high. So did the music. Someone's familiar voice sang out, "*Oh baby, oh, baby; O Baby: Oh!*" Jack wondered if it were Alex Brant . . . and by Felix's quick glance out the door, wondered if she were not wondering, too; her glance returned, met his, blazed. Suddenly he thought of National Senator Weston's remark (at which he had then laughed), "Frahnkly, me dear Jahk, my trouble is that my wife understonds me!"

Felix asked, "And *was* she hanged?"

An inhaustion of gin. Of air. "Of course."

Silence. Felix asked, in a strained voice, "I don't suppose you took into account her state of *mind*—?"

"*Oh* yes."

The glass of gin and its minuscule dose of quinine went up . . . and up . . . came down . . . came down. Shimmering. Very slight tinge of blue?

"—and the Hell she must have been in—"

"Yes." The thrust-out, hairless, tortoise-head nodded, twice. "First off, she had taken her great knife to be sharpened. Secondly, she had dug up her jewelry *and* her husband's savings and placed it all in her traveling trunk. Then killed them both. And left. Found her waiting for the train, ticket in her hand. Premedi*tat*ion. Flight to avoid prose*cu*tion. Jury found her *guilty*. My duty was to pronounce *sen*tence."

"Which you did." Eyes smoldering into Jack's as if he himself had donned the Black Cap over the wig. *Af*ter accurately guessing her cousin's taste in reading matter. *Well,* he eyeballed to her, *May's taste in* *books is one hell of a lot better than your* friend *Alex Brant's taste in music—*

"Which," choke, gasp, "I did."

Silence. Even, for some reason, the music. The eyeball semaphore informed him what he could *do* with his opinion.

"*Stifling weather* all this past week," said Major/Judge Deak. "Can't *breathe*. Doctor says *no* trace of asthma," bad sounds in chest; "*or* of emphysema." He made Stickney Forster a signal to recharge his glass. Judge Deak's expenses were exceeding his income. *But he drank the best gin.*

Somewhat suddenly several of the sitters-in-the-room were gone downstairs, and, as though in a game of Musical Chairs/Going to Jerusalem, several of the dancers-in-the-yard were come upstairs. "Are there rather a lot of sea-turtles around here?" asked English Neville. Deak said he'd seen a few. "Ah, there must have been more than a few in the days of yore," Neville reckoned; "we found you jolly well wouldn't believe how many ghastly old turtle-bones just dug up recently and thrown over there in the bog. *Burnt,* I shouldn't wonder—"

"Kept them in a crawl," the Honorable said.

Noddy: "In a *what?*"

"A cor-*ral,* in North America. Africa? K-r-a-a-l. *We* say '*crawl.*' "

"Well, I daresay they *do*. Never heard of a turtle *trot,* eh? Haw haw!"

"*Who* kept them in the crawl?"

"Pair of cut-throats, who—"

"Cut-throats? Here on Galleon's Caye?"

Jack had not remembered seeing the National improbably named Pony-Boy here before, but here he was: bottle of rum in one hand, bottle of ginger stout (temperance beverage) in the other: And feeling no pain. "Planty of cut-t'roats here on Galliard's Caye in de w'old days," he said, clearly pleased to contribute to the general enlightenment. "Live for *mont's* on tortle-meat! Galliard, he was ahn Ehnglishmahn, me grahd-*fahd*er knew he'm . . . well . . . me *great* grahdfahder." Immediately, regardless of the shades of antiquity, for Stephenson the explorer had remarked, back in those very days, that "all the Baymen are boatmen, and cradled on the water," Pony-Boy said, "Jock, as your boat hasn't got no ox—"

Noddy: "No *what?*"

"—no ox, no oxilliary engine, just sail; as you hasn't got none, Jock, meh-be best you be starting bock. Else you gwayne be oet on de wah-tah ahl night."

What response Limekiller might have given to this unsolicitate advice, with its implication that he was a mere suckling-child where these things were concerned, might or might not soon have been known. But Felix very civilly and very swiftly made her farewells and was gone down the stairs. Leaving Guess Who to follow after. Hastily. Lest she be off, and leave him up to his huckle-bones in the bog. Doomed to live on broiled turtle-meat, and the leavings and drippings of the shandygaff. And the gin.

The need to set the sails and sheets and tackle-in-general to rights relieved either of them from the need to say anything. Certainly a damned good thing. The fading sun would probably serve them well enough until the light tended by Old Captain Barber was visible, and after that sank more-or-less behind them, the lights of King Town would be visible. And even if a mist were to come up (not an impossible thing at this season of the waning year) so that they couldn't see the nation's only city: well, they could damned well *smell* it: the drains of the capital (scarcely above sea-level) were notorious, let the Honorable draft how many Sanitary Ordinances as he would.

By and by, what between steering, pumping, and scanning the horizon, Jack was aware that his temper had gone down to nearly normal. And he looked around to see what Felix was doing. She was being mighty quiet. This was the first real quarrel that they had had, and he hoped that she was not making any plans to scuttle the boat; lo! she was crouching very near to him, and she was shining the flashlight. *Was* she planning to—? Shucks. The water was so shallow he could almost *walk* ashore. She wasn't as tall as he was? Very well. He would carry her on his shoulders; vague thoughts of Saint Christopher. . . .

What was she *do*ing?

She was reading a sheet of paper.

He leaned over. It was a, it was a . . . well, it was something typed.

Hoping that being the first to speak would not result in a pudding or a cheese or something attached to his nose, he said, "What's *that?*"

"It fell out of the book . . . back there."

"And you just *took* it—?" Whoa, there, Limekiller!

She shifted, shrugged, and swiftly shook her shoulders, as if trying to cast off a touch which he had not applied. "Well, he *said* it was a *copy*. So he can easily make another one, and besides I wanted to finish it without seeming nosy; why are *you* being so judgmental?"

Iniquity, transgression, and sin. Judge not, that ye—

Limekiller had learned enough to know that he still had much to learn, and so, silently complimenting himself on his wisdom, thought to drop the matter. Only to learn some more, to wit, that when someone wants an argument, really *wants* it, nothing and nobody is going to prevent it. There is then no Right Way to Handle It. So they had It. Not "Had it Out," just had it. And he felt miserable. How could love turn to this? And then by and by she opened the paper again and they both read it and read it together.

> Linzer and Quashee. About that time, one Linzer or Linzen, a Native of Austria and Quashee a Natuve of Guinea, made a Devilish plot to blow up the Poweder Magazine which would

> worke great loss of Life both Black and White and in the Confusion they rightly expected to follow, it had been their Plot to steal the Gold in the Publick Treasury, which they had reckoned to have opened with a small Blast of Powder simultaneous with the greater and thence they would head for Spanish Waters not doubting but to receive a Welcome after they'd dishonestly profess the Papish Religion. But one or the other attempting to inviegle a Woman of Colour along of them, she having the fear of God before her eyes, divulged the Scheme. Linzer and Quashee were taken tried and sentenced to be hanged. HOWEVER it having come about that the Chapalin's Wife Mris. Manningtone being at that Time in a delicate Condition and their being no point in the Settlement, scarcely, which was not overlooked from the Chamber in which twas expected she would be confined, Governour Endderby a most humane and merciful Man, gave orders that contrary to the usual prackticke, Sentence of Execution was not to be carried out in the Settlement but y^{e} Gallowes was erected on Tanbarke Caye as twas then known, on 6th Decem being St. Nicholas Daye. Quashee expressed a degree of Contritione but Linzene with many Oaths and blusterings declared that 'by G—' he was glad of the Excursion 'Yea he had eat many a great green tortle on said Caye and had rather be hanged there where the Sea Winds blew than in any stinking Settlement and regretted Nothing.' Sentence was carried out and that Part of Tanbarke Caye (the redbrown Mangrave being used for the Purpose of preparing Hydes) has since ben known as Galleowes Point.
>
> Two pennys in the Pund a Bounty on Torbinado Sugar

"Couldn't spell worth a fiddle-head fern," he began, hoping that the Black Dog might be sent firmly from their midst by a diagonal change in subject. But it was not to be. Her look was no friendly one. It was still the slightly sidewise gaze of an accountant who wishes to make clear that although he has yet to lodge an Information with the police he *has* by jove become fully aware of the attempt to queer the books; "You *are* sailing under a curse aren't you?" —and what, demanded the Look, had he done which deserved it? he must have done *some*thing to deserve it, said the Look; sacked a cathedral, or what? and *what* did he plan to do to *un*deserve it? malignantly involving *her,* said the Look—

"What do you mean? *What* curse? Why just *me?*"

Protests of innocence would get him nowhere, said the Look. "It's just one weird thing after another with you, isn't it? Was one of your ancestors a hanging judge, too?" And she cited and related to him other of his odd adventures which he had . . . with some hesitation . . . related and cited to her; events explicable only by accepting the fantastic and the metaphysical. Events which had happened *here* within the compass of this so small yet so astonishing nation: the size of Wales? larger than the Atlantic Province of Prince Edward's Island, where so many Limekillers were buried within sight and sound and scent and touch of the circumambient sea. —But he would accept no guilt on his own broad shoulders. "That's the kind of *country* it is. When you're in a country that's still partly in the last century—"

" 'the *last* century'! Jesus—"

"—or the century before *that,* well, that's what it's *like* here. Nobody travels to Harvard or McGill in a dugout and nobody's car in Ohio ever gets hit by a tapir, but here, *here,* that's what it's *like.* Here. In North America," he used it in the Canadian sense of *The United States and Canada,* "in North America you've got smog—"

"*I* haven't got smog!"—and so they were at it again. Having it again. "And oh my God that's what those 'curtains' were! Those 'bundles of *rags*' and that 'window frame' as I thought they were! It was a gallows and it was those bodies hanging on it until they rotted and fell down! Oh Christ pity women," she moaned.

And there in the dying day, with the curls of white foam, the *perilous seas of faerie lands forlorn,* and the emerging stars, and a line of fading light to the west above the Mayan Mountains, he was astonished and vexed and perplexed and pleased and all the rest of it: *was* he to be a father? *Good!* —but I thought you said you'd decided you weren't pregnant—"

And she: "Oh I don't mean *me.* I don't mean *me.* I mean that poor woman in the old paper. That chaplain's wife. Life within her, life inside of her, because that damn dumbell dominus vobiscum man of hers couldn't get it together to pull out in time, life inside of her and then from any window she could look out of, all she could see was *death.* A child hanging inside of her from a cord, and anywhere she *looked,* what were they getting ready to do, why hang some other woman's child by cords. Ropes, lines," she gestured to those on the boat; "goddamn you all, goddamn it all, all of it—"

A new noise out of the sea, a hum and a buzz, and new lights out of the sea: Noddy's motor-cruiser, or Alex's, and the faint sounds of music and laughter; she lifted the flashlight and waved it and shouted; he made to seize it more in astonishment than anything else, shouted *What was she doing?* and she made to strike him with it and then she just as suddenly flung it down and ran a few steps and leaned against the side; he could hear her heavy breathing. She was sorry, she was not sorry, she wept, she did not weep.

The new noises and new lights faded and were merged into the sea again. A new star rose up from the sea, wavered an instant, than it swung slightly to and fro. Then it was still and hung steady in the firmament. Captain Barber's light. Limekiller adjusted his perceptions. Nodded. Swung the helm just a bit to port.

Having adjusted the inadvertancies of the boat, he thought, he still thought, still he thought he might, readjust the inadvertancies of their lives . . . their life. . . . In a low and calm voice, he said, "Well, we don't like it, but we don't have to like it, that the wind almost didn't take us there. It's the anniversary of some grim event, but it's also the anniversary of St. Nicholas Day, and he *is* the patron saint of sailors. So the wind wasn't very willing, but it took us there, and now it's more willing and it's taking us back." Another and a farther and a fainter star skimmed over the sea further out: another of the motor-craft bringing the guests back to port: Alex Brant? Stickney Forster? and who else? Didn't matter. He saw that she saw it. "And, anyway, now we've got the name cleared up. We don't *like* the name? Not Gallants, not Galliards, not Galleon's. So it's *Gallows* Caye. At least now we know. Now we know, eh. Maybe that ghastly tree *does* fill the air there with its . . . whatever they are. Whatever it is. Vibrations? 'Vibes'? Emanations?" He did not say, but he thought, and he thought that she thought so too: affecting the very winds to drop, to slow, and to delay, one's arrival. The winds had no power over the power boats? So be it. The twentieth century moved on, moved on; dissipating what once had been projected: the infinite reluctancy of those ancient criminals and their prayers not to get quickly to their destination. For St. Nicholas *was* the bringer and giver of gifts. It was grotesque, was it, to recall that St. Nicholas became Santa Claus? Life was often grotesque. And death, too.

Small wonder the large severalty of names: any variation of the basic one. Galleon Caye. Gallon Caye. Galliards. . . . Gallants. . . . Had he not even heard *Callous* Caye? . . . for stealing a puncheon of rum, *to be hanged by the neck until dead* . . . for striking his superior officer, *to be hanged by the neck until dead*. . . . for selling plated silver as sterling . . . for breaking and entering . . . for arson . . . *to be hanged by the neck until dead*. . . . They must, it would seem, have felt incalculably sure of themselves to pass and carry out such sentences for such crimes. And yet it seemed they felt what Anthony a Wood called a *Great Reluctancy* to name the plot of bog and sog where the carrying-out took place, and call it by its rightful, awful name. To call it by its dirty name.

Callous indeed.

But not that callous.

The wind blew better, coming in. But . . . somehow . . . the cracked boom no longer sang to them.

Felix (from "Felicia," happiness), Felix didn't speak. That is, she didn't speak words. But a tiny figure moved from who knows where, from the cubby-hole, probably; and uttered a tiny voice. Skippy. The little cat. And she picked it up, and she crooned a sound to it as she cuddled it and bent her head over it. And he realized that it had originally been *his* cat and comrade alone, that it had shared its master and captain with her; that she could not fail to recall these things herself. Skippy had been a part of him longer than she had. And she held it. And she sang a small wordless song to it.

Off to starboard in the very last light he saw a waterspout, rather like a sketchy impression of a brontosaur with a long twisty neck coming out of the water. Two things were essential to create a spout: for one, you had to have the funnel-shaped vortex of wind; and for another, you had to have the ever-yielding ocean, drowner of men. Neither one could do it alone. Was this a metaphor for his own life down here? Seemingly so calm, his own persona, sometimes calm to the point of indolence, was there nevertheless something latent within him which roused up the elements and elementals of this seemingly placid little nation, itself apparently calm to the point of indolence: so that when the two of them came together, heaven and earth and fire and water were torn apart and reassembled to form shapes unheard of? The, whatever it was, call it the national collective unconscious, may have lain inert until he came upon the scene: a national undersoul awaiting his own catalytic presence? An ambience composed of history, the jungle, the ocean and the night: long subdued . . . and long awaiting. . . . Was that it? Could that be true? that the explanation? Of course, as an explanation, it was incredible.

But what credible explanation was *there?*

The seemingly sweet and placid pre-Columbian Indians, touring the antique waters of the not-yet Spanish Main in their long dug-out canoes with their long cane bows: arriving on these coral strands to sack and burn, enslave the children and the women, and then eat the men in their great victorious cannibal feasts (cannibal, carribal, caribee, Caribbean) . . . then the Spanish swineherds, pious killers of Moors, suddenly becoming overseas conquistadores and viceroys, destroyers of enemy gods . . . the French fishermen converted into buccaneers . . . the English merchant adventurers and woodcutters transformed to pirates and warriors. . . . Black folk caught and enslaved by other Black folk and sold like codfish in the African markets to strange White folk who carried them over the seas to till the soil and clear the forests. Red men enslaved by Red men, White men enslaved by White men and sent over the wild wastes of seas for the crimes of having supported King Charles or King Monmouth. Cannibal fires, galleons plundered and burned, stinking sullied slaveships each one leaving at least one burning village behind; and the forge fires which heated the shackles. . . . Colonial wars and slave rebellions, Indians massacring Black folk and White, Whites and Blacks massacring Indians; American spilling American blood because of dynastic wars initiated in Europe. And then the fearful rites of Hurican, Quetzalcoatl, and Setebos, overlaid with Old World witchcraft and with ju-ju and óbeah, and wax mommets thrust through with thorns, and the voodoo dolls, and the unclean spirits conjured up and given forms and escaped into the woods, there lying latent until—

—until there came down from the oft-times frozen North the very quick corpus of one John Lutwidge Limekiller, from the wild lands of hungry Wendigo: and the Beothuck and Micmac and Huron, torturing their own captives until themselves dead of musket-balls and brandy rum and small-pox—

Was it that he carried with him a pressure like an aura which none might see but which nevertheless and at once and from time to time in its times and seasons swooped down, turning and twisting and sucking up the sea of superstition to form some (so to speak) waterspout, capable nonetheless of killing and of laying waste? Did he, had he, not alone once, but again and again, turned the latent lewdness of ancient times into psychopomps and psychodramas to be played out again and again in the present?

Was he, although as unwilling as any hunchback with his immovable hunch, a wizard with his own immovable wizardry?

Did he, like some old Italian "thrower of evil eye," cast infection by his very glance?

It was a fearful summing-up for him to make, and while making it, and speaking it, he stared intently at Felix: and intently she stared back. And, when at the ending of his summation he stumbled into excuses, "I can't help it, I can't help any of it, I just—"

"I know," she said, "you 'just work here.' Isn't that what the hangman says? No wonder your friends the Nationals prefer hempen rope; *tend to your helm,*" she flung at him, fiercely, as he moved toward her. "*Typhoid Mary couldn't help it, either!*" a breath she took; then: "*Sorcerer!*" and "*Sorcerer!*"

The sails luffed, *crack! crack!* The bow-wave curled around the prow, shedding phosphoresence as a plow sheds loam. "If I *am* a sorcerer," he said, slowly (slowly! for this was quite a new conception)—and Felix: "*If*"—scornful, almost: if the woman with child can be almost pregnant. "If I *am* a sorcerer," he repeated, now white-hot with emotion, "*then you are my familiar!*"

It hit her, he saw on her stricken face the apprehension that it just might be true. Then she turned away.

Winds of good fetch or not, it was hours before they came into port into that small port and ancient haven there on the barm and marge of the Carib Sea: *For the world is wondrous large—Seven Seas from marge to marge—*Lights reflected and shimmered. Music sounded, not the music of any classic instruments, indeed (*It is sweet to dance to music, when love and life are fair./ To dance to lutes, to dance to flutes, is delicate and rare./ But it is not sweet, with nimble feet, to dance upon the air* . . .); the instruments were raw and the music raucous; the Holiday season had begun, and from St. Nicholas Day on the 6th of December to the Day of Epiphany on January 6th, Holiday would hold sway in a Saturday night that was one month long. To and fro, to and fro, the people: they did not, indeed, talk of Michelangelo, their talk was of the New Year's new linoleum and of the Christmas turkey and the Christmas ham: of the presence of these traditional favors. Or of their absence. And of the chaparitas and the pints and, if one were especially fortunate, of the quarts and the "galleon" jugs of festive, festive rum. The vendors were setting out the fresh cabbages and the boxes and boxes of fresh apples, be sure most of them were ruddy and sweet-scented and (Limekiller knew) Canadian. The shops had set out the currants and the scented glazed citron rinds both alike from the Isles of Greece, and the raisins and the nutmeats from manywhere and the brandy and the cashew wine: to start the making and the baking of many and many a holiday fruitcake. Peppery cowfoot *soup* was cooking odorously in caldrons. Millions of mosquitoes whined and hummed, but the Nationals, dismissing these as mere *flies,* danced around as though there was nothing in the warm night air anything like a vexation or a bother.

And those who had none of these material things (save the *flies*) and not even any hopes of them? What joy had they of the season? They had the inalienable joys of watching and mingling with those who did have, they would baste their scant bread in the rich smoke of the others' cookfires. And would pay with the sounds of their inextinguishable laughter, like the ringing of many rich coins. And they had the infinite joys of song. St. Nicholas did not leave them with nought.

Jack and Felix took down the sail. The sails. The mainsail and the jib. Coasted a ways. Then put over to where their pole, *their* pole, still hospitted *their* skiff. Indeed, she said it: *There's our pole and skiff. . . .*

A spirit touched his lips with a glowing coal. Enough of Oscar and of Rudyard and Tom. "*Rowing in Eden./Ah, the sea!/That I might moor myself/ In thee.*" She whirled around (Felix), her face demanding immediate knowledge of Who? "Emily Dickinson," said he. Added, "Critics assure us that of course she had *no* idea—virginal *Em*ily?—that it might be a metaphor of—"

She said, very, very rapidly, "Believe that, you'll believe anything;" said it with emphasis . . . and without emotion . . . whirled around and jumped onto the stone coping of Corn meal Wharf. And was off into the throng. A moment he thought of striding after her, did not. A moment he thought of shouting . . . something. Did not. Watched and observed that she was not heading toward the Swinging Bridge over the Old Belinda River which bisected King Town, and therefore not toward any of the large hotels with their wicked bars; he observed that she almost at once flitted into Spyglass Alley. And was gone. For a scant fraction of a second he thought she might be making for the Spy Glass itself: a liquor booth, but respectable enough that *ah 'oman* might enter without total loss of respect or reputation: but almost at once he knew better.

"Tidings of gret jye, Coptain," a soft, soft voice wished him. He looked down and saw it was the half-hydrocephalic little cripple called, God knows why, Baron Benjamin. (Nicknames in British Hidalgo were a subject on which a thesis might be written: easy enough to say why a certain gaunt, pale missioner was called *Holy Ghost* and why a certain rough-skinned merchant was known as *Mawmee Opple* . . . but why was a perfectly ordinary government clerk called "Mr. Mottram" to his face but otherwise referred to as *Noncy-hahv-ah-behby-in-de-high grahss?* go know . . .) "I am begging for my charity," said Baron Bejamin. Limekiller reached into his pocket and found there a coin of two shillings, a fifty cent piece, still here if nowhere else called *a florin*; gave it to him, and, with a gesture, said, "Keep [meaning, guard] the boat;" and was off. Never so bad a boy or even so brazen a thief would risk the little Baron's displeasure: "Me no want heem to give me ah *bull*-eye, mahn!"

Spy Glass Alley was not very long, and its end was quite ended by a great wooden barn of a building, the property of an ancient endowment and popularly called The Hall. Over its wide-open doors was a weathered sign reading, Society for the Promotion of Christian Evangelism, in large letters. Under this, in only slightly smaller ones: Make ye a joyful noise unto the Lord. To one side on a blackboard was chalked in colored chalk, St. Nich Day Dance *Join the Funs*. Limekiller heard the joyful noise, thought he might as well join: anyway, this was where Felix must have gone. It was as good a *where* to go as any, and better than many.

Also about to enter were a man and a woman. Jack politely stepped aside; it was Neville. And Nicholine. Their faces, which had been fairly appropriate for Making a Joyful Noise, drew formally downcast as they recognized him. "Bad show, eh?" said Neville.

"Poor mahn," said Nicholine.

"Who? What? eh?"

"Major Deak, you know."

"What do you mean?" Was Neville going to mention the sad decay, the rapidly increasing *ageable* quality, the illness, the—?

"Ah, you've not heard." Nicholine's face grew rather cheerful at being arm-in-arm with a bearer of sad tidings. Neville took a deep breath. "Well, he'd said goodbye to Stickney Forster and me and Nicky, and as we were leaving, you know, we saw him start up the steps, and we turned away to stow our gear, you know, in the boat. And we heard him give this ghastly cry. And down he fell! We dashed up directly, but it was clear that he was quite dead."

Jack at once said, "Heart attack."

Neville pulled his nose. It was a long and very English-looking nose. "Don't know about *that,* old boy. Praps. Been no *au*topsy. Yet. Broke his *neck*. Hmm. *Quite* obvious, angle which . . . yes. *Dead.*

"You know. . . ."

And, laying their hands upon him, they pressed on into The Hall with him.

Who was *in* there? Felix, of course. *And* Alex Brant. Dancing . . . don't you know. Jack didn't mind this anymore than he would have minded an ice-pick up his sphincter. Alex was his *friend*. Wasn't he. And anyway Felix didn't look as though she were terribly intensely enjoying it. Although neither did she look as though it *hurt*. Why shouldn't she be dancing with, well, anybody? No reason at all. Though of course Alex was not *anybody*. He was a lecherous, treacherous son of a bitch. He was probably, among men, his, John Lutwidge Limekiller's, best friend. Who immediately recalled Clair Hoffman's definition, worthy of Ambrose Bierce, of *Cuckold,* as *Someone whose best friend has it in for him*. Immediately after that at once noted and noticed the really impressive number of really charming women, ivory to ebony, who clearly did not equate the Promotion of Christian Evangelism with the wearing of a chastity belt: way they looked at him. Why *not?* He was certainly lookable, wasn't he. What said Solomon the King? *Rejoice,* young *man, in the days of thy youth, ere the evil days draw nigh.* Was what. At that moment the music stopped. And as he began to look around with more precision, a voice which well he knew in British Hidalgo, and who did not? was heard speaking in a not unpleasantly penetrating tone.

Someone who was supposed to be everywhere at once (but had not been, Jack now realized, at Gallows Caye . . . and no wonder that for almost two hundred years folk had been somehow reluctant to call it by its necessary but nasty name; had called it by any other name sounding enough like it to identify it): "Ah, Mr. Jack Limekiller and where is your lovely lady, ah *there* you are me dear Mrs. Felix, hello me dear Alex! I can only stop a moment as I am due at a Convocation of the Grand Lodge of the Wise Men of Wales of which I am Titular Grand Wise Man—"

"Yes, Chief Minister."

"Yes, Chief Minister."

The familiar night tumult of the port city was all around, increased by the place and the occasion, but the Honorable Llewellyn Gonzaga McBride's voice, though not particularly loud, was a voice which carried well (and, Gad! it better!). "—but I have just come down from Benbow Bight, where I was being hospitted by the White Creoles at Woodcutters' Cove, and there I heard for the first time what I am sure must be an old folk song, Mr. Thomas Hardy cites it in one of his stories and I am sure you will be interested to hear it—" Jack was not sure he shared that surety, but the Queen's Chief Minister in British Hidalgo had already raised his voice (somewhere in between tenor and baritone, and if musicologists had no term for it, so much the worse for them) in song: one listened.

Oh me trade it is a qveer vun,
Simple sailors all,
Me trade it is a soight to see!
For me customers Oi toi
And Oi svings 'em up on hoigh,
And Oi vafts 'em to a far countrie-ee-ee!
And Oi vafts 'em to a far coun-trie!

The Black Bayfolk paused and laughed and called out to hear their clear tan leader singing in perfect imitation of the archaic accent of the White Creoles; called for more, *More!* but L. G. McBride, saying something about "a rather grim and grisly humor, eh?" with a wave of his hand and a smile passed on. Alex Brant also smiled at Limekiller, his rather thin, cool smile was neither friendly nor defiant, but seemed ready to be either. Limekiller looked at Felix and Felix looked at him. *Her* look . . . and it was a long, long look . . . was really neither grim nor grisly, neither defiant nor friendly; what was it then? he had never seen it nor anything like it until just these few hours: once again: it contained emphasis—but emphasis of *what?* It was not familiar, this look, but he felt that he was going to have to become familiar with seeing it again. And perhaps again and again.

For, without having been swung up on high he had indeed been wafted to a far countrie, a very, very far countrie indeed. He had yet to learn exactly where it was.

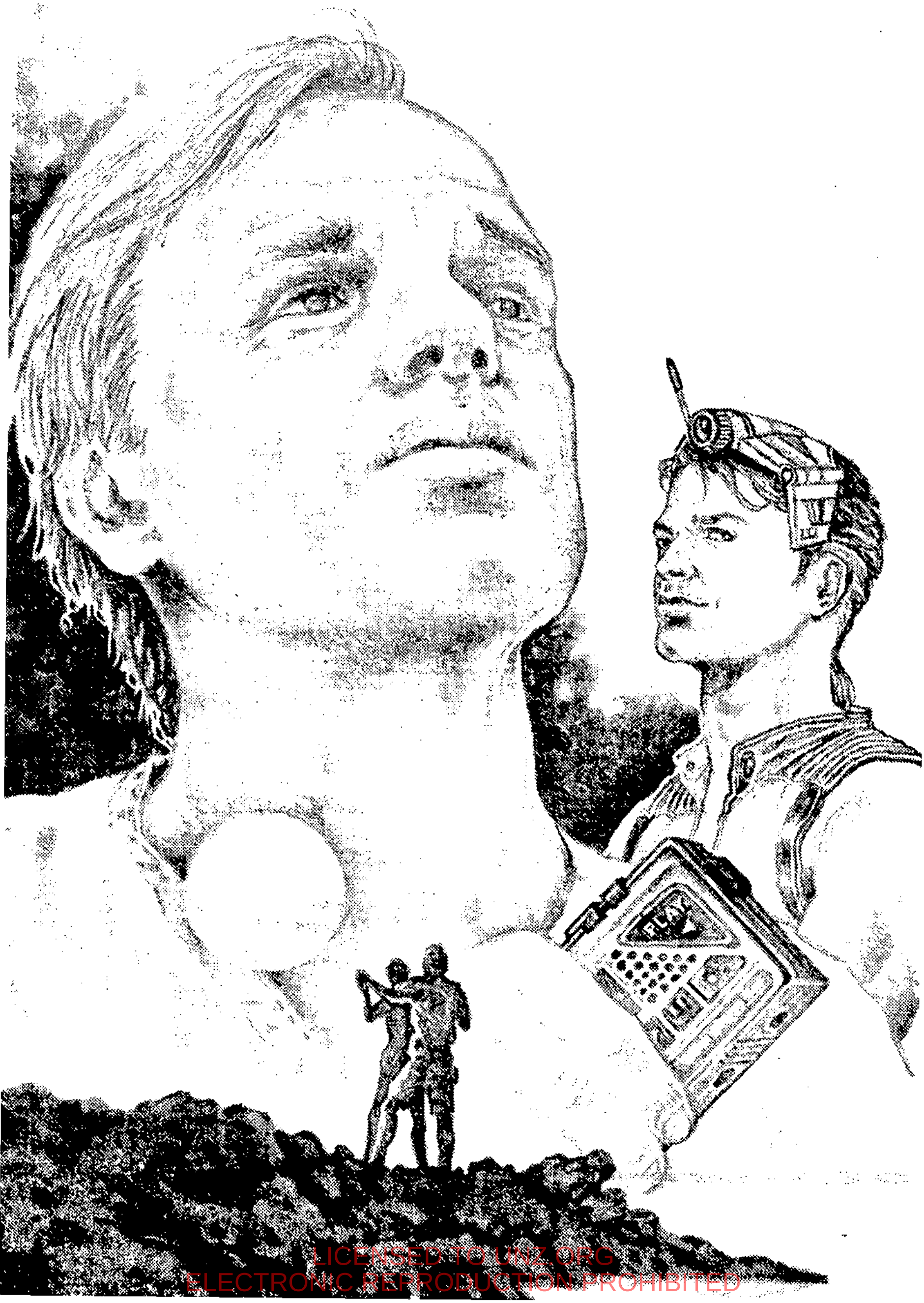
But wherever it was, it was very far from Eden. ●

IN MEMORIAM

Avram Davidson died on May 8, 1993, of a heart attack, after having been hospitalized with a bout of pneumonia; he was seventy years old. Avram had a strong presence in the pages of this magazine, making a string of twenty-one sales to *Asimov's* that started under George Scithers and continued to the present day. He may be the only writer ever to win the Hugo Award, the World Fantasy Award (including the prestigious Life Achievment Award), *and* the Edgar Award. Avram was at his best at short story length, and his short work has been collected in many volumes—including *The Best of Avram Davidson*, *Or All the Seas with Oysters*, *What Strange Seas and Shores*, and *Collected Fantasies*—but his novels, although they may not reach quite the level of accomplishment of the best of his short stories, still contain much that is brilliant, engrossing, and fascinating, especially the underrated *Masters of the Maze*, *Rork!*, *Rogue Dragon*, and *The Phoenix and the Mirror*. His recent work was as strong or stronger than ever, and his recent series of stories about the bizarre exploits of Dr. Engelbert Eszterhazy (recently collected in the World Fantasy Award-winning *The Adventures of Doctor Eszterhazy*) and the strange adventures of Jack Limekiller (as yet uncollected, alas) must rank among the best short fantasies written by *anyone* in the last ten or fifteen years.

Avram was one of the most eloquent and individual voices in science fiction and fantasy, and there were few writers in any literary field who could match his wit, his erudition, or the stylish elegance of his prose. He was not always an easy man to work with, but I was one of the editors who thought that his stories were worth every bit of the aggravation you sometimes had to put up with in order to obtain them—at his best, he may have been one of the great short story writers of our times, and he was certainly one of the great Uniques, an absolutely individual voice and perspective and mind; nobody other than Avram could possibly have written any of Avram's stories, nor could you have possibly mistaken a line of Avram's prose for the prose of any other writer, and that's something rare and valuable in a day when some people are trying to force fiction to be as bland and interchangeable and "marketable" as possible. Avram fit no molds, and can not be replaced. He will be missed. The only comfort we can take from his death is that his *work* survives, and will be there to speak to us in that unique, instantly recognizable, quirky, intensely flavored voice every time we open the page and read.

—*Gardner Dozois*

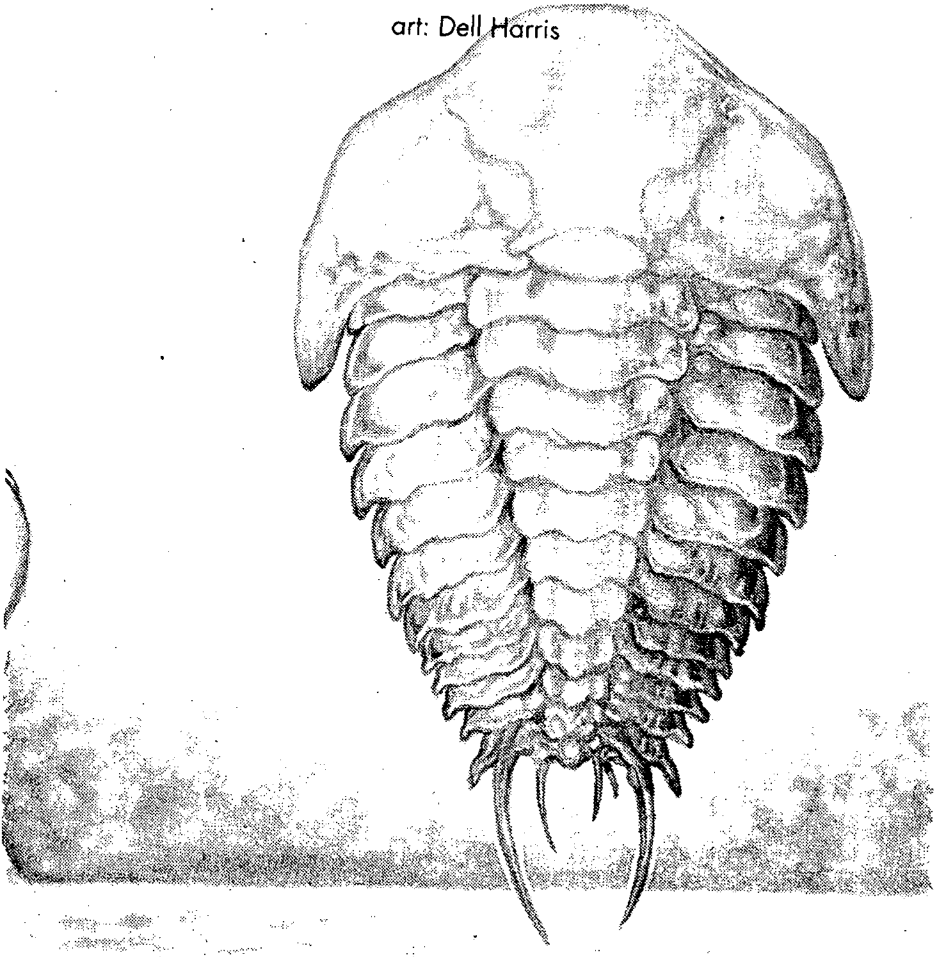

PLAY

THERE AND THEN

Steven Utley

Steven Utley's latest time-travel tale sets us down in the middle of the Paleozoic. Here, people may study plants and animals just coming into existence, but they must cope with drives and issues as old as time itself.

art: Dell Harris



The wind had shifted, and the night was full of land smells, estuarine smells, green slime, black mud, rotten eggs. The only sounds were ship and sea sounds; occasionally, there was also a murmur of conversation in the shadow beneath the eaves of the helicopter deck. Chamberlain's two assistants were back there somewhere, tending equipment, their voices muffled as if by layers of flannel. The moon had vanished into a vast, dense cloud bank. The fantail was so dark that I could see little of Chamberlain except his glowing red eye and, intermittently, red-tinged highlights of his face and hands. He looked devilish in those moments. He held the glowing eye sometimes between his fingers and sometimes between his lips. Every so often, its glow would expire, and he'd fumble with his pockets, there'd be a sputter of flame, the thick smells coming off the land would momentarily mix with that of burning tobacco. I wondered again how he had got his ancient and disagreeable vice past screening.

Chamberlain sat in his beat-up deck chair, surrounded by a mutant-toadstool growth of meteorological godknowswhat. I leaned against the rail. Hundreds of people lived and worked aboard, but late at night it was easy to get the feeling, and hard to get rid of it, that we were the only human beings in all the world. Actually, we represented a few tenths of a percent of present world population.

After a while, I said, "You should come."

"Too much work to do here."

"Oh, come on. We've both been cooped up here too long. We could both use some excitement."

"Hm." *Hm* was the sound Chamberlain made when he meant to laugh. "I hear they could use some excitement ashore, too. There's none of the tumult and squawk you just naturally associate with prehistoric times."

"You don't think a live sex act with trilobites will be exciting? Come on. A walk on the beach'll do you good."

"This the beach I smell? Ew."

"We'll be on a different beach. What you smell is blowing off the estuary. We'll be way around the coast from here."

"Still." The old deck chair squeaked unhappily as he shifted his weight. "I'm a meteorologist. Meteorologists aren't supposed to have to smell bad smells."

"Then don't smoke."

He called me a body-Nazi and ignited a new cigarette off the old. "Sure smells like the honey pot got kicked over."

"Gripe, gripe," I said. "You have it made. The weather never *does* anything here. The only forecast you ever make is, warm, east wind, possibility of showers. You sleep when you want, come out and play with your expensive toys when you want—"

"You've got no damn idea what my workload's like. Anybody has it made on this boat, it's you."

"—sit back and watch the sunset and drink till you nod off!"

He made a rumbling noise deep inside himself. "You know as well as

I do that nothing enhances a sunset better'n a drink. And nothing enhances a drink better'n a nap." The glowing eye moved away from his face in the direction of his invisible assistants, Immelmanned, and went back to his face. When he spoke again, his voice was so quiet that I had to lean down into his nimbus of smoke to hear his words. "Those two wait till I'm asleep and then sneak away to fool around. If you know what I mean."

"How simply terribly shocking."

"It's true. Had my eye on 'em for a while." The eye brightened for a moment, fell away in his hand. "Definitely something going on between 'em."

"Well," I said, "what could be more romantic than holding hands under a prehistoric moon? Ooh woo, what a little moonlight can do."

"That from one of your damned old songs? Of course it is, got to be. I forgot, you're one of *them*. Listen, it's past the hand-holding stage with those two. They're up to the bucking-and-grunting stage."

I couldn't recall having seen either of Chamberlain's assistants in good light. Now, in my imagination, they appeared as shadows, rubbing against each other. I said, "Well, it's still most people's favorite way to pair-bond."

"Fat lot of good pair-bonding ever did *you,* Kev. None of your ex-wives has spoken to you in years."

"They've hardly been able to, under the circumstances."

"Anyway, you think I want a couple of disgruntled ex-lovers on my team?" He made a disgusted sound. "When they fall out, this boat won't be big enough for the two of 'em."

"Ship. This is a ship, not a boat."

"Ship, boat," he said dismissively.

"Rain, dew," I said, in the same tone. "If Captain Kelly ever hears you call his ship a boat, he'll keelhaul you, hang you from the yardarm, and make you walk the plank all in the same afternoon."

"He makes allowances for dotty scientists. Point is—"

"The point *is,* your young honeys are happy together right now. Maybe they'll stay happy together. There's always the possibility that things'll work out, you know."

"Hm. That what you told yourself along about the third time you got married?"

"Sure was."

"You are such a dog with women," he said, and extinguished his latest cigarette. A moment later, I heard a faint click in the darkness. "Want another drink?"

"Sure."

He gave me another capful of brandy from his flask. Officially, it was a long walk from the Paleozoic to the nearest liquor store. In fact, there was probably enough booze on board to float us the thousands of kilometers to Caledonian Land—proto-Greenland, Kalaallitt Nunaat-to-be. Old hands know that when a body needs a drink, only a drink will do. Pleasantly abuzz, I peered off into the darkness toward the shore. Its smells were palpable, but it wasn't even a glimmer in the night. The moon gave no sign of coming out of its cocoon of clouds. After a time, I realized that Chamberlain had fallen asleep. I left him snoring harshly in his deck chair, and his assistants to their alleged smooching, and went up to the helicopter deck.

The helicopters sat there like big metal sculptures of dragonflies lighted for Christmas. Mechanics tinkered with the motors while people wearing overalls loaded equipment and supplies. A shirtsleeved man stood by with the unmistakable air of a junior supervisor. He looked my way as I passed and seemed about to ask if I was authorized to be there, but then two of the mechanics said hello to me and I said hello back, and you could see the wheels turn behind the shirtsleeved man's face: maybe I wasn't a scruffy old stowaway, maybe I was somebody eccentric but important. I knew the mechanics and loaders but had no idea who he was. So many similar-looking people had arrived in the past few weeks that I didn't know who a tenth of them were.

The ship's engines throbbed suddenly as Captain Kelly got us under way. I put strangers out of my mind and strolled all the way forward and halfway back. Ours was in no way a lovely vessel. It had originally been designed and built during the Oughts to deliver Marines to beachheads and provide support with missiles and helicopter gunships. Not a lot had been done, or could have been done, to tone down its brooding militariness. The missile launchers were gone now, and the gun turret rebuilt to house one of the astronomy team's big telescopes, but the superstructure, helicopter deck, and boat bay had required no redesign. The forest of antennae, scanners, things, and stuff rising above the bridge looked formidably thorny. Except for human beings in helicopters, there wasn't an airborne creature on Earth, but still the dishes turned and cocked and listened, as intently as if swarms of kamikaze aircraft lurked over the horizon.

The task of renaming the vessel had fallen to a group of more or less prominent scientists, who duly voted to rechristen it *H. G. Wells*. Some nasty hustling little demagogue in Congress scotched that on the grounds of Wells's having been, besides a lousy stinking Brit—this, of course, was well after the end of the Special Relationship between the countries—a communist, or some closely related species of one-worlder. The story goes that, told to submit something "more patriotic and appropriate," most of the scientists next agreed that the vessel should be renamed after one or another of certain late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century presidents, because the ship, too, would move boldly into the past. "This kind of reckless sarcasm," a dissenter warned, "will backfire on us," and, sure enough, it did. Most of us since neglected to call the ship anything except "here" when we were aboard and "the ship" when we weren't. And we did keep a big framed portrait of Bertie Wells hanging in the rec room, over his alleged epitaph: Dammit, I told you so!

The brandy and the stroll conspired to fill me with a luxurious sense of peace and belonging. When my pocketphone buzzed, I murmured absently into the mouthpiece.

"Kevo," said Ruth Lott, "you're up."

Peace and belonging fled. Ruth had the mellifluous Georgia-accented voice I hated to hear. I said, "Ruth, all decent people are asleep at this hour."

"That's how I knew you'd be up."

"Okay, I'm up. I just hope you're calling about something really interesting, like maybe an out-of-clothes experience you personally have had."

The phone barely did her great sweet laugh justice. "I have a little job for you." She always had a little job for me. "Come see me, I'll tell you all about it."

I knew and she knew that she had me, but even a rabbit struggles in a lion's grip. I said, "It really is kind of late."

"Won't take but a minute." When I hesitated long enough to make her impatient, she said, "Oh, and before I forget—" her voice was as dulcet-toned as before, but I wasn't fooled "—note on your calendar, extension review next month."

"Now *that's* low!"

"Why, whatever do you mean?"

"It's blackmail!"

"No, actually, Kevo, it's extortion. Bye."

"Go ahead," I said into a suddenly dead phone, "hang up on me, see what it gets you."

Then, having no choice, I did as I was told.

Ruth was a Junoesque fiftyish woman with the world's sliest smile. She trained it on me when I appeared in her hatchway. She said, "Are those the best clothes you have?"

"I was—I *am* going ashore when we get to Number Four camp."

"Please see if you can't make yourself just a teensy bit more presentable. I want you to meet a party at the jump station in a little while."

"Since when am I the official greeter? You break your legs off above the knee?"

"These are media types, they make documentaries, videos, something. They're supposed to be very good." I gestured, *So?* and she added, "So you're all media types. You should get along."

"There's got to be someone else on this bucket who's—what am I supposed to do? It's not like these people will arrive in any condition to listen to me give a welcome speech."

"All you have to do is say hello, show them around when they're up to it, whatever. I'm making them your responsibility."

"But why *me?*"

"Because you are not snowed under with work, you bum. How often do you actually touch your wordboard?"

I gave her my most pained look. "Writing isn't just a matter of touching a wordboard. You'd know that if you'd ever had specialized training in the putting together of subjects and verbs so that they agree. The real work's mental."

"You're mental," and she laughed her laugh again. "How *is* the book coming along? Think you'll have it finished by the Mesozoic? Listen to me, and believe me when I tell you this, I'm doing you a favor. Once we're privatized—don't give me that look, we both know it's a done deal—once we're privatized, the new bosses will be looking very carefully at their assets and liabilities here. These include," and she ticked them off on her fingers, "one converted assault ship with some el strange-o scientists embarked, and some hired help, and you. You've been hanging on here for too long. It's time you had visible means of support. You need to be seen earning your keep. This little job won't take too much of a bite out of your life. Just till these newcomers get acclimated. Just make sure they have a good time."

"What, find them women, young boys?"

"I'm serious. Northemico's sponsoring them."

That impressed me. Northemico figured prominently in the push for privatization.

"Think of this," Ruth went on, "as sort of an opportunity to do what a writer's supposed to do, make all of this, this—" She gestured helplessly, unable to find a word that took in everything from ship's routine to the reality of our surroundings and circumstances. I supplied it.

"Stuff," I said.

"Right. Make all of this stuff make sense to them." She eyed my attire again. "It really will help if you try not to look so much like a beachcomber."

"I *am* a beachcomber."

"Kevo, I put up with you because you make me laugh." She leaned toward me confidentially. "Even Captain Kelly puts up with you. He thinks of you as our resident artistic type and has the weird idea that you're brilliant. God knows why. The new bosses, when they get here, aren't going to put up with you unless you seem to be of use around here. They'll probably institute a dress code, too. Now go on, get to the jump station," and she urged me on my way with the kind of little wave women use to dry their fingernail polish.

The tang of ozone in the jump station was as sharp as an icepick up the nose. I tried out looks and gestures of welcome on Cullum and Summers, the two techs on duty. Summers appeared to think I was pretty funny. Cullum appeared to think I thought I was pretty funny. They did the synchronization countdown. The medical team stood around the rail-enclosed sending-and-receiving platform and watched as its surface shimmered and grew bright.

First to arrive was a woman who was so shaken up by the experience that the medical team had to roll her away on a gurney. The man who followed her looked gray but insisted that he was okay, please take him topside. I couldn't talk him out of it. Cullum and Summers exchanged looks with me and quietly made a bet between themselves: I either would or would not get the fellow out of the jump station, through a short companionway, and onto the starboardside gangwalk before it was too late.

As it happened, I did, but just barely. The man made it the last couple of steps with both hands clapped over his mouth. He grabbed the rail, stood there uneasily for a moment, then leaned out over the dark sea, out into blackness, and retched at length. He didn't actually lose his lunch because he hadn't any lunch to lose. Only the first visitors to the Paleozoic hadn't known not to eat before making the jump. They had gone about suited as if for Mars—you weren't even supposed to breathe the air here, let alone cough up your socks. The past was supposed to be as brittle as a Ming vase—you didn't dare give it a cross look. It was years before people got comfortable with the idea that if the past was resilient enough to accommodate an 8500-ton ship, it could probably accommodate the everyday stupidity of the species embarked.

I stood behind and slightly to one side of the newcomer. When he turned from the rail, I handed him a bottle of spring water and said, "This'll help." He took it, rinsed, spat over the side. When he tried to hand the bottle back, I declined as if I were doing him a favor. He pulled a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket and wiped his mouth. He was in his late twenties or early thirties and well-built. He would have had, ordinarily, what I call friendly good looks. At the moment, in the light of the safety lamp, he had the color of oatmeal.

"If you want," he said, "you can say you told me so."

"That is our motto here."

He gingerly felt around the lower edge of his ribcage. His hands fell abruptly to his sides when he saw me watching him.

"I should introduce myself," I said, and did.

"Rick King," he said. I was grateful that he didn't offer to shake hands. "Can't those technicians do something to make it so you don't get rattled apart when you come through?"

"They've been working on it forever."

"You want more folks to come and visit you here, you're going to have to make the trip more pleasant." I didn't reply to that. The last thing I wanted was for more folks to come and visit me here. "They told me all those drugs I had to take would help."

"They did help. Without them, you'd be feeling *really* bad right about now."

"And this *smell*. Hits you right in the face."

"Uh huh. But we're moving away from it. Anyway, you get used to it."

He shook his head. "Can't imagine how."

"If you're up for it, a turn around the deck might be a good way to start."

I led him up a deck and forward. His color slightly improved after a couple of minutes, but heat and humidity were taking the last measure of starch out of him. I figured he was about ready to collapse, and I'd be able to hustle him off to quarters, then slip ashore before Ruth knew what was up.

"Except for the stink," King said, "I could be on a boat in the Caribbean or somewhere. With the stink, I guess I could be off the Texas coast. When I first heard about all this, I thought, wow, travel through time, see prehistoric monsters battling fang and claw, you bet!"

"Sorry, fang and claw haven't quite evolved yet."

"Well, so far, nothing's what I expected."

"Common observation." I had a niggling suspicion, founded on nothing more substantial than King's being some kind of film-maker, that all of his expectations had been shaped by the movies, that he had come prepared to see, besides primordial ferocity, jump-station technicians who were prematurely balding men dressed in white coats and carrying clipboards, not guys who could have been mistaken for air-conditioner repairmen and displayed much hairy butt-crack whenever they hunkered down to fix stuff. I wondered what King would make of the scientists ashore, who wore big khaki pants and canvas shoes that made them resemble ducks. Still, if he had to have crewcuts and creased slacks, there were always the naval reservists who attended to the actual running of the ship.

Suddenly, though not exactly unexpectedly, King made a sound like *ah-rurr* and pressed both hands against his abdomen. His expression was alarmed. "I think I better get to the restroom," he said.

"This way," I said, "to the head."

When he finished in there, I showed him where he was to bunk down. Someone had thoughtfully brought his gear from the jump station and stowed it for him. King took out an object the size of a wallet, unfolded it with the thoughtless ease of long practice, and slipped it over his close-cropped skull—a headheld camera. A thin cable ran from the jawpiece to batteries and recordpack in his pocket; the spikemike stuck out like half of a set of insect antennae. He looked my way, the headheld whirred faintly, and I pretended to become fascinated by the paint on the bulkhead. Headhelds disconcert me. I never know whether to make eye-contact with the wearer's natural eye or unnatural one.

"Be prepared is my motto," King said.

I looked at him in wonder. He was still a mess. I asked if he didn't really want to get some rest, and he said he was too excited. I sneaked a peek at my watch. The boat would be leaving soon, and I was bound and determined to be on it. I made my fateful decision and asked him, "Do you think you're up for a little boat ride and campout?"

"I'm up for anything."

I looked doubtful, and not just because I wanted to appear sincerely concerned about him. Then: "Okay, it's your funeral. I'll go get my things and meet you back here. We'll pop into sick bay to see how your friend's doing—" he had not once inquired about her in all this time "—and then we hit the beach."

"Great! D-day in the Devonian!"

Silurian, I thought as I turned away.

King's friend's name was Claire Duvall. Chance had treated him with kid gloves and smacked her upside the head: she had a mild concussion. King took the news well. I shouldn't have held that against him, because I was even more impatient than he to get to the boat bay, and with much better reason. Nevertheless, it rankled me.

The boat bay could have stood some redesign. The slap of waves against the hull reduced unamplified speech to so much mutter. You could ruin your voice working in this part of the ship. At night, you could ruin your eyes, too, and your shins if you weren't careful. Few lights showed. Captain Kelly, it was said, didn't like to excite the, understand, extremely limited imaginations of light-sensitive Paleozoic marine organisms. I could dimly see human figures working in and around a boat, and called down, "How soon till we leave?"

"Kev!" someone called back. "Come on if you're coming."

Someone else bawled out, "Will somebody up there please throw some goddamn light down here?" There ensued a bit of rude jawing back and forth, and then a shaft of stark white light suddenly spotlighted the ramp of the boat bay as if it were a stage. People froze like deer in traffic. I beheld the true object of my desire.

She looked like an ivory statuette from my vantage point. Up close and in good light, she had blue eyes and fair brown hair. She was wearing cut-offs and a T-shirt, and at any distance and in any light she had the best legs in the Paleozoic. Vicki Harris had been haunting my thoughts for some time. All at once, I had *seen* her, though I'd been looking at her for weeks, months, who knew how long? Sometimes it happens that way.

The light switched off. I remembered to breathe. King and I climbed down, and everybody found a place to sit amid the jumble of boxes in the boat. The motor coughed and gurgled as the pilot revved it. The sides of the bay loomed around us like immense black cliffs. As we eased out, the almost-full moon emerged from the purple clouds, suffusing the air with milky light. Above the rhythmic prum-pum of the motor and the hiss of water parting before the prow, King said, "My God," and then, "Wow!"

"No kidding," said someone behind me.

I looked around and found that I could just make out the faces of my companions. Cardwell and Jank were aft with Hirsch, the pilot; Vicki Harris sat amidships. All of them except Hirsch gazed upward. I'd have done so, too, but for the warm pleasure I got from gazing at Vicki Harris. She noticed me staring at her and cocked an index finger moonward to redirect my attention.

"Seen it," I said.

She flashed a grin. "Me too, but I never get over how it looks. It's like it's almost but not quite the same moon. Like the features I'm used to seeing don't exist yet."

"I asked Hill about that once. You know Sharon Hill? One of the astronomers. She told me it's the same moon, less some impact craters.

The main difference is in rotational velocity or some such. We're seeing it sort of from behind and off to one side."

She directed a look past me. I heard a faint whirring and remembered King. I made introductions, and she reached around me to offer him a hand and said, "Mister King."

"Please," King said, "Rick," and held on to her a beat or two longer than I liked.

"Vick," she said.

"Vee for short," Jank said, behind her.

"Vee Vee," said Cardwell, "if you want to be really disarming."

"My delightful colleagues, Doctors Jankowski and Cardwell." Her tone of voice fell somewhere in the middle of affection, tolerance, and reproach. I'd learned from Jank—who'd affected not to find my sudden curiosity remarkable—that she hated her first name. I have few opinions about what parents should call their girl babies, though I know a trend when I see it: names ending with the letter *i* have become true artifacts; more and more young women are answering to monikers that end with *o*, Fujiko, Tamiko. Still, I had had a lovely, sweet girlfriend by the name of Vicki in high school and was ever afterward kindly predisposed toward anyone who bore it. Not, of course, that I didn't find Vicki Vick Vee Vee Harris entirely attractive in her own right.

"It's Cardwell's performing trilobites," I said, "whose antics we hope to see."

"I should get some great stuff," said King. He talked past me, to her. "I make documentaries and things." Talk about disarming. Documentaries and things.

She said, "Really?"

Vick and Rick, I suddenly thought, oh no.

Jank evidently thought it was a bit much, too, for he said, "*What* other things," and paused, and added, "Rick?"

"Commercials," King said, "infotainment, that kind of thing." I could tell that he was slightly taken aback.

"So which is it this time," Jank demanded, "documentary or commercial?"

"Documentary, of course."

"Of course. And when do you start?"

King lightly touched the headheld. "I already have. You don't have any objection to being on television, do you?"

Now Jank was taken aback.

"We've been on television," Cardwell said. "Not lately, though. Been a while since we had a documentary crew through here." He had the same interested attitude he'd had the time he showed me my first prehistoric shellfish. He could have been joining in two colleagues' discussion of trilobites.

By the way Jank shifted in his seat, I could tell that he was buckling down for business. He said to King, "You seem a little undercrewed."

"My partner was badly shaken up by the jump. But what you mean, of course, is, why aren't I hauling around a lot of help? No one does that any more unless they're making big Hollywood product."

Jank wouldn't let up. "What's your background?"

"Media arts, of course."

"Of course. Aren't there any real scientists who can do documentaries any more?"

"I took the famous crash course in rocks, bugs, and stones before I came." King laughed. "Whoa, Mister Overqualified, huh?"

"Yeah," said Jank, "thank goodness you're not just some facile slime-sucking adman."

Everyone lapsed into silence. Vick and I exchanged embarrassed smiles. The wind sweetened. Hirsch turned the boat and expertly took it in, bringing us to rest without so much as a bump alongside a natural stone jetty. We all scrambled ashore carrying something and were greeted by several of the semi-permanent residents of Number Four camp. The jetty dipped into the beach's sandy slope at the high-tide mark; the camp sat above. The moon was down and the sky was turning gray by the time we had the boat unloaded. I somehow found myself at Vick's side as we lugged the last of the cargo along the jetty. King and Cardwell were right behind us. Jank was already out of sight among the tents.

"Let's do breakfast," I said to Vick.

"Sounds good to me," and then, probably—I told myself—because she wanted to make up for Jank's rudeness, she said over her shoulder, "Join us, Mister King?"

"You bet." He obviously was happy that she'd asked but sorry that she hadn't called him Rick.

We entered the camp, and Vick veered off. "Meet you at the mess tent," she said to no one of us in particular. I didn't care for how King watched her walk away.

I had Cardwell and Jank's standing invitation to share their tentspace; a geologist named Crumhorn agreed to take King in, though it was on short notice. Cardwell and I delivered him to Crumhorn's tent and were about to move on when he said, "I don't believe I've actually sucked any slime since grade school. I'm just a film-maker, Kevin." When he spoke my name, I felt a sudden, irrational, tremendous urge to rub myself all over with hot sand or maybe ground glass. "If I said or did something to set Doctor Jankoski off—"

"Jankowski," I said.

"Oh, Jank," Cardwell said, "Jank's just," and shrugged as if that explained everything. He had the dimensions but not the temperament of a bear.

"Breakfast," I told King, "is in the big tent over yonder," and set off to get mine and left him to get his as he would.

Vick had saved two places at the table. I settled into one of them and happily stirred my coffee. We listened to Rubenstein, a cartographer, who, two days before, had completed a trek overland from Stinktown, Number Two camp, on the estuary. "Only sign of life we saw the whole time," he said, "was one of our own 'copters, headed inland."

Crumhorn dropped into a chair across from me and scooped up a piece of toast. I asked where his houseguest was, and he said, "Conked out. Just like that. Hi, how do you do, snork, zzz."

"I was wondering when it'd catch up with him. He jumped in a few hours ago, and he's been going like a chipmunk on an exercise wheel ever since."

"So," said De La Cerda, another geologist, "he's, what, a video producer or something?"

"Or something."

She shook her head. "These people just keep trickling in."

Rubenstein said, "You say that about everybody."

"I'm part-Indian," De La Cerda said, "and Indians know about people who keep trickling in. The Sioux had a word for white people, *wasichu*. It means, you can't get rid of them."

Rubenstein looked at her askance for a moment. Then: "You're not Sioux, you're *mestizo* or some goddamn something."

Hendryx, yet another geologist, said, "So *sue* her."

Amid the groans, Crumhorn observed that punning was a cry for help, and Westerman, the slight blonde botanist seated next to Hendryx, said, "I used to love this man. Now I'm for feeding him to the fishes."

Hendryx looked smug. "No fishes this time of the Paleozoic, right, Vick?"

"Just some armored ones that look like tadpoles wearing football padding."

"They always looked kind of art deco to me," said De La Cerda.

"Well," said Vick, "you have to go to Stinktown to find them, and then they're only about as big as your hand."

"Are they edible?" I said. One thing I did miss in the Silurian was catfish sandwiches.

Vick made a face. "They've got a taste sort of between salt and mud."

"Vick Harris," Rubenstein murmured over the rim of his coffee cup, "girl icthyologist and gourmet." He sipped and grimaced. "Talk about salt and mud. So where're all the big exciting fish? Where's old Dinowhatsit? You know the one, ten meters long, armored head. Mouth like a big ugly pinking shears."

"Dunkleosteus, alias Dinicthys."

"Yeah, that's the one, where's old Dunkywhatsit?"

"Not even a glimmer in his great-great-granddaddy's eye, I'm afraid."

"So," De La Cerda said to me, "what about this video guy?"

"Northemico sent him to make a documentary about you folks."

Both De La Cerda and Rubenstein gave me the same sharp look, and Westerman said, flatly, "Northemico."

In spite of myself, I spread my fingers in the air and said, "He's just a film-maker."

"You mean like you're just a writer, I'm just a botanist?" Westerman shook her head. "Nobody who's made the jump in the last month or so has been *just* anything. This film guy's just not as obscurely specialized as most of them."

"Wait a minute," Vick began, but Rubenstein cut her off.

"If he really *is* a film guy. Probably a spy."

"I don't think you're being fair," said Vick. "You can't go around automatically assuming someone's a spy just because—"

"Vick," said Rubenstein, "you gotta admit, Northemico and the rest of that pack've been slavering to get in here from day one. There's money waiting to be made here."

She appeared doubtful. "I don't see trilobites and seaweed as the basis for growth industries."

"Try oil." De La Cerda gave her a not-unkindly look. "Something's sure going on. On the ship—" she nodded vaguely in the direction of the sea "—we're suddenly cramped for space. Too many newcomers all at once. People I've never seen before are suddenly looking over my shoulder all the time. Suddenly it's harder to schedule use of a helicopter. Then it's just impossible, because they're all the time flying people and surveying equipment into the interior."

"And we all know," Westerman said, "that there's nothing *in* the interior to survey."

"Sure," said Hendryx, "not if you're a botanist!"

Westerman laughed along with him and then made a face at him. They must have been a riot in bed.

Crumhorn rested his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. "No reason to think there's suddenly something mysterious or sinister going on," he said. "We've been surveying the interior ever since we got here."

"Think about what you just said," said De La Cerda. "*We've* been surveying. *We've* been doing this, that, every other thing. We, us, the members of this expedition. These other people belong to some whole other expedition. It's riding piggy-back on ours. Gradually, it's displacing ours."

"They want to know everything," Westerman said. "They don't want to tell you anything in return. Look, I don't mind answering questions about my work, I *like* talking about it. But these people ask all the wrong questions."

"What questions are those?" Hendryx demanded sharply.

"Tim," said Westerman. I looked at her in surprise. She was almost pleading with him. "We've talked about this."

"Bottom-line kind of questions," said De La Cerda. "Is there you-name-the-mineral here? Is there a lot of it? Things like that. And you can bet somebody's spent a lot of time calculating which natural resources might be safe to grab here and not have them missed four hundred million years from now."

Hendryx's wedge-like jaw jutted belligerently forward. "Nothing ever *was* missed, was it? So they can't have taken anything out. Or maybe they did, maybe you can take out whatever you want, because the past takes care of itself. It has so far."

Westerman folded her thin arms across her chest and gave him an angry look. "I can't believe I'm hearing this from you."

"You should get used to the idea that not everybody thinks exactly the way you do. From time to time, you might even try rethinking a position."

"Tim, you *know* if Northemico gets loose here, it'll make the Antarctic feeding frenzy look like a model of responsible conservation."

"That was different."

Several people demanded in chorus, "*How?*"

The beleaguered geologist glowered. "What *have* we missed from the Paleozoic? Maybe the stripmine scars are buried deep inside the earth. Maybe they've eroded completely away. Maybe they've been deformed beyond recognition and understanding."

"Lot of maybes," muttered Rubenstein.

"We know the landmasses are drawing together, and that the collision'll fold this whole region over on itself."

Everyone at the table was regarding Hendryx very seriously. Westerman said, "Are you saying anything people do here's okay as long as they hide the evidence under a mountain range?"

"Listen, the bills have to be paid, or we have to go home."

"This *is* home," De La Cerda said, "for some of us."

"You think so." Hendryx patted his lips with a napkin. "But you can't live here without supplies from the future, and the pipeline stays open only so long as somebody foots the bill to keep it open. If the government stops, then Northemico or somebody has to start, or that's all she wrote." He pushed his chair back, stood, surveyed the semicircle of mostly hostile faces before him. Vick hung back, and because she did, I hung back, too. "I want this expedition to continue as much as you do."

Westerman's mouth was set in a thin, straight line as she glared at his retreating back. An almost identical line creased her forehead. "I sometimes wonder," she said, "if good sex is worth all the aggravation."

After breakfast, Vick said she had to go with Cardwell to splash around in tide pools and collect specimens. I passed what passed for the cool part of the morning bringing whoever didn't have work to do up to date with the latest shipboard gossip and scurrilous rumor. It got definitely hottish toward midday, but then clouds scudded in at noon, dumped enough rain to cool things off reasonably, and, mission accomplished, scudded away. I took a long nap and was greatly improved for it. Rick King was up and around by late afternoon—days were shorter in the Silurian, and years consequently longer, by three dozen days—and looked rested, fit, and out of place in what I took to be the latest thing in twenty-first-century beachwear for men.

I had hoped simply to prowl the beach, poke at the occasional lump of cast-up sealife, and just enjoy being on land for a change. King, however, prevailed on me to steer him around and make such introductions as I didn't have to disturb anyone's work to make. Nearly everyone was polite, and De La Cerda, of all people, actually seemed charmed. Westerman couldn't keep suspicion out of her face, and King, to give him his due, received her chilly how-do-you-do and perfunctory handshake with admirable grace.

When we had run through the possible introductions, King studied the cliffs behind the camp. "What's up there?"

"More sand and rock."

"There a way up?"

I should have lied to him, but I didn't, so next I had to take him up the path to the top. He looked like Tarzan going up; I felt like Sisyphus. When we got up, he stood arms akimbo and gazed off at the low mountains in the distance while I sat on a rock and pretended that I wasn't panting for breath, that my heart wasn't rattling loosely in its mountings. It was getting into evening, and all of that bare jagged rock had begun to burn prettily.

Number Four camp was located on a stretch of coastline where erosion had cut away headlands to form slip-faulted cliffs. Detritus littered the narrow scalloped beach below. This was a rough bit of seafront, but wherever you made landfall, you found yourself on an inhospitable shore. The one-day North American west was a volcano range; one-day Appalachia was a chain of islands; between the two stretched an unbroken shallow sea. Just so one's sense of direction would be utterly skewed, the equator bisected this sea from the future site of San Diego to that of Iceland. Equatorial North America was geologically part of the great northern landmass, Laurasia, whose southern counterpart was Gondwanaland, comprising South America, Africa, India, Australia, Antarctica. In all the unsubmerged regions of the world there was very little soil, and what soil there was was thin, poor, and as vulnerable as life on land itself. Actual greenery existed only beside the waterways. It didn't measure up to the popular idea of a coal-forest, with fern trees, dragonflies as big as crows, salamanders as big as sofas. None of the flora was more than waist-high; most were much shorter. Carpeting the lowest and moistest patches of the immense badlands was *Cooksonia,* a rootless, leafless plant, no more, really, than a forked stem, towering a mighty five centimeters above the ground. The giant sequoias of the day were lycophytes, club mosses, growing to dizzying heights of one meter. They were comparatively sophisticated—stems with forked branches bearing clusters of small leaflets—but still fell short of what you'd call rank jungle growth. They didn't soften the land's serrate outline so much as make it look furry and itchy. Munching happily through all this green salad were millipedes, some of them big enough to provoke a shudder but all of them perfectly harmless. Munching happily through the millipedes were scorpions that looked and carried on as scorpions were always going to look and carry on. There were some book-gilled arthropods that rated the adjective "amphibious." There were no terrestrial vertebrates, excepting human beings. On the list of things yet to be were lungs, flowers, wings, thumbs, bark, milk, and penes. I was happier here than I'd ever been anywhere else.

King broke a long silence by saying, "This is good stuff." He patted the pocket containing the recordpack. "Long slow pan from the primordial ocean to the desert of barren rock and drifted sand." He fiddled with the headheld for another couple of seconds. "This world's one big still-life, though."

"Take it up with the folks who punched the hole in time. Maybe they can open up a more action-packed era for you. The Mesozoic, or World War Two."

"What do they do for excitement around here?"

I took my cue from his choice of pronouns. He excluded me from his subjects, to remind me, I supposed, that we were both media types, cousin- if not brother-professionals. I said, "That depends on who you talk to. For Cardwell, it's trilobites. For Westerman, it's club mosses."

"What is it for you?"

"Being here."

He brushed that away. "Being here isn't the be-all and end-all of your existence. You're a writer, writing a book."

I had come ostensibly to write a book about life on and around a research vessel embedded in mid-Paleozoic time. The book still wasn't finished, but, any more, it was beside the point. I had lost all sense of urgency about finishing it. I didn't need the money. I didn't need anything to do with writing a book, except as an excuse to stay.

I said, "I'm here because this is my home."

"Is it, now?" He shook his head. "*One day,* this place will be home. People won't just work and live here, they'll be born and die here. That's what makes a place home. Right now, this is summer camp. People come here, do the equivalent of making baskets and looking for arrowheads, and when the time comes, they go home."

"Hardly anyone goes ho—back. Not if they can help it. They just have to keep passing their extension reviews. It's less trouble to maintain us here than to replace us."

"Still—"

I slid off the rock. "It'll be dark soon. I'm not going to negotiate that path in the dark. Wouldn't advise you to try it, either."

I started down without waiting to see if he would follow. Later, in the mess tent, I saw him schmoozing with Hendryx and thought, Kindred spirits. Then I took it back. Hendryx was one of us. King, I swore, would never belong.

Everyone scattered into the dusk after supper, most of them claiming to have work that absolutely had to be done before Cardwell's show started. I changed to my least-ratty attire and went down to the high-tide mark ahead of everyone else to find the best seat. My chip player was in my pocket. I took it out and pressed the go button, and merely ancient music floated out over the prehistoric sea. It was "Stardust," recorded by Artie Shaw and His Orchestra in A.D. 1941. I stood swaying in time, enthralled as always by Billy Butterfield's incandescent trumpet, Jack Jenny's smokey trombone, Shaw's own soaring clarinet. Then, as I waited for the next track to begin, I heard somebody behind me and put my thumb on the stop button. Vick paused a short distance away. She said, "I heard music."

"Yes, you did," I said, and then, even more inanely, "I don't have earphones, I hate earphones," and before I could stop myself, "If God'd intended for us to listen to music on earphones. . . ." Babbling.

Fortunately, I relaxed my finger on the button, and Shaw's rendition of "I Surrender, Dear" throbbed out of the player and enveloped us like a smoky blue cloud. I was gratified to note that she listened almost all the way through the track before she said anything.

"What *is* this music?"

"Jazz. Swing. Music."

"It's," and she waited two whole seconds before finishing the sentence, "lovely." She waited again, listened some more. "Lovely and old."

"Barely pre-World War Two," I said, trying not to sound defensive.

"God, my grandmother wasn't even born then."

"Mine was a teenage girl in Indiana. She used to scrape up thirty-five cents somehow and go see Glenn Miller at the local theater. In those days, thirty-five cents was a lot of money for a teenage girl to scrape up."

"This is Glenn Miller?"

"A contemporary. Artie Shaw."

She looked like someone trying to decide if a name she'd never heard before meant anything to her. Then she admitted that it didn't.

"No need to apologize," I said. "I'd be fairly astonished if you had heard of him. Pop music before Elvis Presley, before rock and roll, was like the Precambrian to members of my own generation."

"I have heard of Elvis Presley."

I decided from the way she said it that she probably didn't have him confused with some other, subsequent Elvis—Costello, Hitler, Christ, one of those. We listened to "Moonglow," "Begin the Beguine," and "Summit Ridge Drive." The chip contained dozens of other tracks that I'd personally selected from Shaw's body of work, but I didn't want to be a mere tune jockey. I thumbed the stop button twice after "Summit Ridge Drive" to switch off the player.

"Certainly does grow on you," she said.

"Uh huh. I have Goodman and Ellington, too. Cab Calloway, Billie Holiday, dozens of—I think American pop music peaked sometime between nineteen thirty-five and nineteen fifty." I looked at her closely. "I wrote a book about it once. Am I getting carried away here?"

She showed me a small gap between her thumb and forefinger. "Only a little. I know people who'd make me listen to the whole Flucks catalogue." My utter ignorance of even a portion of the Flucks catalogue must have been obvious. "Flucks does a lot of sub- and ultrasonic pieces. Some of them are said to make listeners lose, ah, muscular control."

"Gosh, why couldn't Artie Shaw have recorded songs like that?"

She laughed. "Well, I don't see the fun in it, either."

Other people had been drifting down from the camp all this while. They made themselves comfortable, talked, drank, or simply stared out to sea and waited. Jank showed up with a bottle of brandy, and the three of us passed it around and heckled Cardwell to get the show started. The level of brandy in the bottle got lower and lower. Lulled by a murmur of waves and voices, I nodded off. When I awoke, with a start, the moon was out, the tide was in, and it had become as chilly on the beach as it ever got. Next to me, Jank was gently shaking Vick awake. Everyone else was heading back to camp.

"Rise up, Lazarus," Jank said, "and walk."

I said, incredulously, "I missed the show? You let me miss the show?"

"Wasn't any show." He nodded seaward, at Cardwell, who stood in the foam at the water's edge, a master of ceremonies whose star act had let him down. "Tomorrow night, maybe."

"Doesn't he know?"

"When they get here, they'll be here." Jank drew Vick to her feet, and I made a point of helping. "Tomorrow night, the night after—*some* night this week, anyway."

Between us, Vick nodded agreement, sleepily. "Moon's full. This is the season."

"How can even the trilobites know when it's time? There's only ever the one season."

"If it'll ease the pain of this disappointment," Vick said, "why not come snorkeling with us tomorrow?"

"Love to."

Jank and I saw her to her tent flap like gentlemen. I started softly whistling "Embraceable You" as we moved on, and then King bounced up out of the darkness and announced that he had wangled us invitations to a poker game in Rubenstein's tent. He was disheveled and dirty. His shoes looked to be a total write-off, and his beachwear wasn't in much better shape. I couldn't decide whether that ought to raise or lower him in my estimation—the one because he didn't care that he had ruined his expensive outfit, the other because I imagined he could afford not to care. He was thoroughly pleased with himself. Through the simple expedient of spending a night on a beach, he had begun to prove me wrong and become one of the guys. I had never been so disappointed with the people at Number Four camp.

"In all this time," Jank said, "I never knew I had to have an invitation to play poker with Rubenstein." He looked at me. "How about you?"

I was dead tired, but something made me answer, "Oh, why not?"

"Sure," said Jank, "why not?"

Rubenstein poured each of us a drink and dealt us in. The drink was heavenly, the cards were trash. I looked across the table at him and demanded, "These all you have?" He asked how many I wanted and peeled them off. I looked at them and thought, Worse and worse.

"Yow," said Jank. "No cards."

"Yow indeed," said De La Cerda. "You're much too happy with your hand."

"Aah, he's bluffing," I said. "Jank always bluffs."

De La Cerda threw her cards down. "He wants you to think he's bluffing. I fold." The rest of us played out the hand, to our regret. De La Cerda looked smug as Jank raked in chips. "Told you so."

The deal passed to Jank. As he shuffled, he said, without quite looking at King, "How'd you get this assignment?"

After a second, King realized that he was the person being addressed. "Applied for it, how else?"

"Applied to Northemico?"

"Yes." A pause. "Much as you applied to the government."

Jank snapped a card down on the table in front of King. "I applied through the University of Texas."

"Play cards," Rubenstein growled.

We played. Jank won the hand again. The deal passed to me. As I shuffled, King said to Jank, "You talk like you think the government's one thing and Northemico's another. Like they're separate, and one's good and one's not." He shrugged. "Or one's bad and one's worse."

Jank stared determinedly at his cards. "Aren't they? Separate, I mean."

"Public government, what you think of as *the* government—its job is just to keep the citizenry in line, make sure they don't make trouble for the *real* government. Real government is *private* government. Its job is helping rich people to become more so."

We stared at him, all but gaped, in fact. Jank finally said, "If that's so, why the whole big show of keeping the corporations out of the Paleozoic all this time?"

"Takes a while to agree on how to cut up a pie so that everybody's happy."

De La Cerda nodded slowly, as if agreeing against her will. "Like carving up old gangland cities. It's just good practice to keep your trouble away from your money."

Rubenstein said, "Does anybody here want to play *poker,* for chrissake?"

"Just a sec." King shut his fan of cards and closed his hands around it. He looked straight at Jank. "You've got some grudge against Northemico, so, because I'm here making a documentary for Northemico, you've got a grudge against me. Lots of people get mad at the government. *I* get mad at it. Doesn't mean I'm mad at *you,* or anyone at this table, or anyone in this camp. I'm here to do my job, same as you."

"Remember the ad campaign," Jank said to nobody particularly, "when Antarctica finally got opened up?" I could tell from King's expression that he'd never imagined any connection between himself and Antarctica. "Yesterday's land of perpetual ice and snow, today's treasure chest of mineral wealth. My favorite was, What good is it to the penguins? Succinct. Punchy." He looked around at all our faces. "I'm willing to bet there's this bright entrepreneur somewhere who's seen pictures of the Silurian sea, how beautiful and serene it looks. He has a brainstorm. A luxury hotel in the prehistoric past! The Silurian Arms! Next thing you know, there's this whole big ad campaign pitched to assholes with money they don't know how to spend. The ads say crap like, Come back, come home, to a quiet and unspoiled world. Dine at Chez Paleozoic, gourmet cuisine from then to now."

King had sat back in his seat and folded his arms while Jank talked. Now he said, "You may have missed your true calling." He grinned to show that he really was trying to be a sport. "You'd have been an ace adman."

"No, I was born with a soul," and Jank grinned, too, like a carnivore. "About this luxury hotel. Hotels mean earth-moving equipment, mean draining all those smelly bayous. There'd have to be golf courses, too. Rich assholes can't live without golf. Golf courses mean landscaping Paleozoic Appalachia to resemble Palm Beach. There'd have to be colored people to work as caddies and groundskeepers and do all the crap jobs, and poor neighborhoods for them to go home to at night. And golf courses mean effluent runoff, and particularly they mean grass, which as Westerman will tell you is a flowering plant, not due to appear until half past the Cenozoic. Someone decides club mosses are boring and a few palm trees wouldn't hurt. So-called sportsman won't get much of a kick out of little jawless fish, hey, this is prehistory, let's liven it up! Bio-concoct some big placoderms like Dunkleosteus, maybe even some plesiosaurs. Or just import bass. Earth history's going to get really twisted when all the little improvements take hold here."

King raised a shoulder in a half-shrug. "Sounds pretty farfetched to me. This is what's real. On the other side of the hole is an exhausted planet with nine billion people on it. On this side is a whole untouched planet."

"It's the *same* planet," Jank said. "Let Northemico go mine the moon instead, it's already dead."

"Too dead," said King, "and too far away. The Paleozoic's alive, and it's *here*. Are you going to sit there and tell me we should let our whole civilization run down so a few thousand folks here can go on admiring the place's natural splendors? Face facts. The thing's inevitable. When a thing's inevitable, the best you can do is accept it and try to find the good in it."

"Yeah." Jank pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "Just look where accepting the inevitable has got us so far."

I stood up, too. The buzz the first drink had given me was long gone; a second drink hadn't brought it back. Rubenstein, who had sat fuming with his cards fanned in his hand throughout Jank and King's set-to, cursed and flung down a full house.

Jank and I wove our way among the tents and down to the beach. I was past being ready for bed, but felt he needed me to stay with him.

"Well," I said, "he's right about one thing. The Silurian Arms does sound pretty farfetched."

"Like twenty-first-century America would have to De La Cerda's damn Indians? *They* never expected to get overtaken by events, either. People never do, and yet they always are. All of us here are going to be overtaken by events any day now. Any moment. We can't outrun them, can't duck them."

"Then what do we do?"

"Then we face a choice between, I guess, becoming some sort of revolutionaries or goddamn acquiescing in another Antarctica. Put *that* in your book, Kev."

"I guess," I said, "we'll all just acquiesce. What else could we do, really?"

"Toss certain parties through the hole and then wreck the jump station."

I looked at him unhappily. We weren't just talking about golf courses in the Paleozoic now. "They'd just open up another hole."

"You don't just 'open up' another hole. You have to find one and then widen it. They could look for a long, long time. Even if they found one they could use, the odds against it being one that would bring them right back *here* are billions, trillions to one. Even if they didn't miss by much, they could miss by five or ten million years."

"Which means," I said, "they don't play golf in the Silurian, they play it in the Ordovician or the Devonian."

"At least they couldn't mess up the Silurian. You can't save everything, you save what you can."

"Jank, the whole crew on the ship is Navy Reserve. They'd never throw in with mutineers. And you know that mutiny *is* what you're talking about."

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "Yeah, hell, I know."

"Plus, the ship's not self-sustaining, and what is there to *eat* here? Trilobites, seaweed, bony fish Vick says taste like salt and mud. At least at your luxury hotel we could get a decent meal, and a drink besides."

He seemed unable to decide how much of what I said was serious and how much was meant to be funny. After a moment, he gave me a comradely punch on the arm and said, "Meet you on the jetty tomorrow A.M." He walked away, and I quickly lost sight of him in the gloom.

In the morning, it took a handful of aspirin to ease my aching head and three cups of burnt-tasting black coffee to get my eyes ungummed. The one other late-breakfaster was Rubenstein, who pointedly passed my table to sit at another one and hissed, by way of saying good morning, "A full house!"

I found Jank and Vick on the jetty, and King, too, all of them with masks and flippers in their hands. I hesitated when I saw King. He was an annoyance to Jank, but for me he was definitely shaping up as a rival. I was wearing faded cut-offs and suddenly became very conscious of the contrast provided by his sculpted thighs and calves and my scrawny knobby old-man's sticks. Vick, however, didn't recoil in horror when she looked at me, and I was further emboldened when she gave me a smile and a come-on shake of the head that a plaster saint couldn't have resisted. There is no way, I told myself, I'm *not* going into the water if King does.

Still, as Jank was getting me equipped, I said in an undertone, "What's he doing here?"

Jank shrugged helplessly. "He found out somehow and asked Vick if he could come along."

"You want to drown him?"

"Maybe something will eat him."

The four of us waded out until we had to swim, then swam out to where the water was six or seven meters deep. Sea and sky were warm, calm, and very clear. It was another perfect day in a ten-million-year summer.

The bottom reminded me of a *NatGeo* holo. Reef life only looks disorganized. Elsewhere in the world, coral polyps may already have been great, slow, patient architects, building barrier reefs the size of California; here, they were putting up lumpish, honeycombed bungalows. We passed over successive crescent-shaped zones dominated by gastropods, scalloped brachiopods, pink flower-like crinoids. In each zone, particular types of straight-shelled and slim tusk-shaped nautiloids jetted about above the bottom, looking like octopi in party hats. At their passing, particular types of elongate burrower disappeared under the sand with a minimum of fuss, and one or another variety of pillbug-shaped trilobite stopped grazing and dodged among the seaweed. The trilobites ranged from the fingernail- to the cracker-sized. There were prickly echinoderms, vase-shaped sponges, and limy stands of worm tubes. The first time I had ever seen any of these creatures, in clear, calf-deep water at low tide, with Cardwell standing beside me and pointing them out, I'd been disappointed. There's nothing *strange* about them, I'd thought, they're just these inoffensive little marine animals, going about their business. In spite of myself, I had, like King after me, expected more in the way of red-mawed ferocity, or of glandular imbalance, at the very least. None of these creatures was longer than my forearm. Most were smaller than my fingers.

This wasn't a scary sea by later standards. Most of the marine life that was equipped to bite hugged the bottom, where the food was, and, consequently, where the eating occurred. On dives, you stayed off the bottom and always scrupulously observed the rule against touching anything unfamiliar unless Jank or one of the other marine specialists handed it to you. We glided as huge, remote, and inaccessible as planets above the world of burrowers and scurriers. Only a few of the nautiloids seemed to notice, and all they did was track us as we passed overhead. Halfway through the Paleozoic Era, there was already that unnerving gleam of intelligence in cephalopod eyes. I glanced over my shoulder to see how my companions were doing and saw King watching, not the sea bottom, but Vick's. The headheld—I hadn't seen him without it since he donned it aboard the ship—made him look as if he were wearing an echinoderm for a cap.

Directly below us, the free-swimmers suddenly executed hard turns and rocketed away with their delicate pale tentacles fluttering behind. That spooked the more alert bottom-dwellers, and the nimbler of these made for cover among the corals. An instant later, something moved angularly across the feeding ground. It had many variously sized and shaped appendages sticking out from under its streamlined headpiece, which was adorned with two blister-like eyes as purposeful-looking as radar housings on fighter aircraft. One set of long appendages resembled nothing so much as vice-grips, another looked like sculls, and several short bristly pairs between the two were expressly for locomotion. The flattened body behind the head was divided into a dozen segments; the tail ended in an awl-like spike. The animal tore straight into a hapless trilobite. The vice-grips went to work, raising a swirl of mud and wreaking fearful havoc—the trilobite flew apart at the joints.

All of us remembered at the same moment that we occasionally had to bob up for air. We broke the surface together, and King spat out his mouthpiece and yelled, "What the hell *is* it?"

"Eurypterid!" Jank told him.

"Sea scorpion!" I put in.

We went back under. Below our waving flippers, the eurypterid swept bits of butchered trilobite under the front edge of its head. The victim's survivors had quit the area as fast as their zillions of tiny legs could carry them, or had wedged themselves into crevices in the coral. Only some cephalopods warily hovered close by, tasting blood.

The eurypterid ate as if it didn't have a care in the world. Maybe it really didn't. It was the biggest animal I had seen in all the time I'd sojourned here, and even I knew a thing or two about its tribe. Eurypterids—the term "sea scorpion" was misleading; the animals' closest relatives were horseshoe crabs—were the biggest arthropods of all time. The biggest ever found, *Pterygotus,* was two meters long, almost three with its main claws outstretched. The one before us measured only about half that, but we maintained our distance, and I personally would've preferred the view from a strong glass-bottomed boat.

The thing finished its repast and half-scuttered, half-swam into a dark space beneath a coral shelf. Jank signaled to King and me to stay where we were, and then he and Vick went down to where they could peer under the shelf. I was relieved when they kicked away and rose, and grateful, too. I was becoming fatigued. We swam until we could wade, then splashed toward the jetty. I noticed that I was going in faster than I had gone out, impelled, no doubt, by that silly fear some people have of getting a leg laid open by a flick of a marine monster's spiky tail. Unmindful of me, Jank and Vick were talking breathlessly of eurypterid body parts, the chelicerae and the telson, the prosoma this, the ophisthosoma that. King kept abreast of them, not so much listening to what they said as simply watching them say it. That damned headheld.

We flopped panting onto the rocks, and Jank grinned at me and said, "I spent a whole year at Stinktown trying to study big live eurypterids close-up. Came away with almost nothing to show for it except a scar this long." He held up his forefinger and thumb to show me how long.

"How do you mean," said King, "close-up?"

Jank's grin shrank to a smile, but he was too excited, he couldn't keep himself from answering, he'd have answered a blood enemy's questions about his specialty right then. "I tried nets and lobster pots. The varmints busted the lobster pots to pieces with their tails. I got this smallish one in a nylon net, almost a baby to the one we just saw, and had it half over the gunwale when it became annoyed and started taking the boat apart. It sideswiped me on its way back into the water."

"So, what, you just dived and looked at them?"

Jank shook his head. "Not at Stinktown. The water's too muddy. It would've been like diving in chocolate milk. With the possibility of blundering into a power saw thrown in."

"Well, I take it back," King said happily, "I really thought this place was empty," and he got up and strolled away.

"Empty," Jank breathed, "Jesus!" I tried to gauge Vick's reaction, but she was busy with her mask and flippers and didn't look up.

We were celebrities at suppertime. As happens with marine life that gets away, the eurypterid grew larger and more fearsome with each telling, until I capped matters by describing it as having been big enough to gut an orca and likening it to a lawn mower as it ripped through mats of hapless bottom-feeders. Spirits remained high as everyone collected on the beach afterward. Cardwell was having to put up with a lot of heckling and did so calmly, like Leonardo's man who knows the truth and doesn't have to shout. King kept circling him. Arty shot, I thought, and sort of happened upon Vick among the rocks at the base of the jetty. Before I could say a word to her, however, somebody on the beach shouted, "They're here!"

A foaming wave cast up a dozen glistening shoe-sized lumps almost at my feet. The next wave brought another dozen, and the one after that, scores, hundreds. I heard Cardwell give a whoop—it was more of a bellow, actually—and my first thought was that the sound would scare away the creatures we had gathered to watch. Then I remembered that eardrums, too, were on the list of the yet-to-be. Cardwell rose to his full height and spread his arms in welcome, and from around him came applause and a ragged chorus of male and female voices, "*Ta dah!*" and one lone smart-aleck's demand, "Yeah, but what's your *next* trick going to be?" Everybody stood up and began moving noisily back and forth along the tide line. Almost at once I found King tagging along with Vick and me, but for at least a little while I didn't care. It was *showtime.*

Within twenty minutes, there were thousands of trilobites on the beach, females with males in tow. The females half-buried themselves in wet sand and dumped their eggs while the males released sperm. It doesn't sound like anything you'd want to lose your head about, but trilobite males were as eager as males of any species—some females had three or four suitors tagging after them—and there were hazards such as never spiced up human procreation.

Sometimes a trilobite was overturned. It would kick a bit with its legs, then contract the muscles running along its back, roll itself into a ball, and let the next wave draw it into deeper water—where it was at considerable risk from cephalopods and other predators. The press of bodies behind pushed some overturned trilobites too far onto land for waves to pull them back. Vick picked up one of these and showed me the paired, jointed legs. King leaned in between us to capture the moment for posterity. Vick turned and lightly chucked the animal back into the water, and then several more after it. Otherwise, they'd have still been on the beach, dying, when the sun rose. King stayed with us and managed to stay with her in particular. I was thinking about chucking him into the water when he asked her, "Why do you throw them back in? What about natural selection and all that?"

"What about it?" she said. "It's getting on toward the Devonian Period. Trilobites are on their way out anyway."

"Then why. . . ?"

I stooped, picked up a stranded animal, made an underhand toss seaward. After a moment, King did the same. Vick looked pleased with both of us, which of course only half-pleased me. I wondered how to get him to go be in somebody else's face for a while. God sent somebody—who, I didn't see and didn't care—to snag him by the arm and direct his attention to an especially frenzied or imaginative expression of arthropod passion. I offered up a prayer of thanks, motioned Vick to come with me, offered up more thanks when she did. We strolled for a bit, saying nothing, then climbed onto the jetty. The chip player was in my pocket, loaded with a sampler program. We looked at the moon and the sea and listened first to a Tommy Dorsey rendition of "Moonlight in Vermont" and next to a "Moonglow" by one of Benny Goodman's combos. She sighed. What a little moonlight can do.

At length, she said, "Can you dance to this music?"

My heart raced. I had picked out these tracks myself, with serious kootchiness in mind. June moon spoon. I said, "Millions did."

"No, can *you* dance to it?"

"I do what people've always done. I fake it. If all you want to do is hold on to somebody and move in time with the music, it's easy." I opened my arms. After a moment, she came into them. "Okay, now put your left hand on my shoulder. I hold you lightly at the waist. Now put the edge of your right foot against the inside of my left foot, and the inside of your left foot against the outside of my right foot."

"This is already starting to get complicated," but she leaned away from me and looked down to position her feet. "Tab A into slot A. Tab B into slot B. Got it."

"Don't press your feet against mine so tightly. Maintain the contact lightly. Relax, stay loose."

She shifted on her feet and leaned back in against me. I was happier for that.

"Now just glide with me when I move," I said. "I'm going to lead with my right foot and follow with my left. We take one step this way." We took the step that way, stiffly, like automatons. "Then another. Then I angle off a bit and take one step back. I learned how to do this in junior high school. It's served me well for over fifty years."

I could have kicked myself for reminding her how old I was.

The jetty lay like a titan's vertebrae half-buried in the sand, pitted and uneven and altogether not an ideal surface for what we were about. Nevertheless, she began to get the hang of moving with me, began to loosen up, and I held her close and as tightly as I dared and got dizzy on her scent. After a minute or so of that, I said, "Song's almost over." It was "Sleepy Lagoon." "We're going to end with a dip."

"What's *aieep!*"

"See?"

She was laughing and lost track of her feet and almost fell. I steadied her and didn't give her a chance to slip out of my arms, or to think about doing it. I'd picked these tracks and known what I was about when I picked them. Billie Holiday started singing "You're My Thrill," a performance that could raise goose pimples on a corpse. Vick made a sound like *ooh*. Then came an instrumental version of "Where or When" by Duke Ellington and His Orchestra; Paul Gonsalves's vaporous saxophone enfolded us. Behind us, somebody said, "Yo. Fred and Ginger. Want a drink?"

It was Cardwell, feet planted wide, face beatific in the moonlight. He held up a silver flask and offered us the screw-on cup. It looked like a thimble among his thick fingers. We gave him a smart little bit of applause, and I said, "Bravo, Doctor Cardwell!"

Vick asked him, "Who're Fred and Ginger?"

"Don't mind him," I said, "he's living in the past."

Cardwell, who was almost my age, snorted like a happy bull. "We're *all* living in the past!"

We sat down on the end of the jetty and proceeded to get pretty silly together. She was between us, and at some point she slipped her arms around our necks and gave us a squeeze. We talked about trilobites and about nothing in particular, or didn't talk at all but listened to "Happiness is a Thing Called Joe" and "Blue Flame" by Woody Herman, "Body and Soul" by Benny Goodman, "Lover Man" by Holiday. We took turns dozing. It finally worked out, just at dawn, that Cardwell was dozing and Vick and I were watching the sea lighten and the night retreat to the west. She looked sleepy and content, past being drunk but still short of hungover. There was a small dab of mud on her neck. I brushed it away and said, "Doctor Harris."

She said, "Mister Barnett."

"How come both of us've been here as long as we have, and I've only recently realized what a swell person you are?"

A smile spread across her face. "You're slow."

Kiss her, moron, I told myself.

And at that very moment, King came scrambling up the side of the jetty like the evil monkey he was and dropped into a squat before us. I heard the headheld's faint whir and saw its eye seek Vick's face. I couldn't tell from her expression whether she, too, was conscious of having been interrupted at a crucial moment. "All I can say," he said, "is, wow!" Mister Articulate. Someone on the beach hallooed and called him to breakfast by name. Somehow, he was still one of the guys. It eluded me.

Not everyone had stayed up drinking for nights running, or was old, so not everyone at breakfast felt entirely as washed out as I did. I wanted to hang around, to head King off at the pass if the need arose, but started to nod and almost face-dived into my food. I bade Vick as gallant a farewell as I was able without being a total clown and hobbled achingly off to my cot. The snoring hillock on the next cot was Cardwell; he had almost the same beatific look on his face. Jank, in skivvies, sat in a camp chair and scratched his pectorals. He nodded at a scrap of paper on my cot. "That came in from Sparks a couple minutes ago."

I carefully sat down on the cot. "You wouldn't have any hair of the dog, would you?"

He looked around blearily. "Is it after noon yet?"

I looked at the writing on the paper. *Call me. Ruth.* "Later," I said, and became unconscious.

Which was a mistake, because by the time I regained consciousness, Ruth, who was not someone who liked to be kept waiting, had had time to put a fine vindictive edge on her plans for me. Another mistake was concluding my account of King's impromptu beach holiday by telling her that he seemed well on the way to carving out a secure niche for himself in the camp and I therefore ought to be relieved of all responsibility for him. She agreed. Then, in as sweet-Southern-sexy a voice as though she were telling me to go ahead, pick something out of the *Kama Sutra,* she added, "This will allow you to devote your time to your *other* guest, Ms. Duvall, when you get back to the ship tonight." I sputtered, protested, tried to argue. She wouldn't argue. "Just make sure you're with Hirsch when she comes back," she said, "bye, hon," and signed off.

I spent some time complaining to anybody who would listen, but hardly anybody could listen. Everyone had work to do. Toward sundown, however—by which time I was well past disbelief and outrage and clear to the sullen cranks—Jank showed up at the tent to watch me toss my meager gear into my threadbare seabag and listen to me damn Ruth. When I had exhausted her as a subject, I started in on King, whom I likened, in swift succession, to a burr under my saddle, a thorn in my side, and sand in my undershorts. Jank burst out laughing.

My surprise and pain at his unsympathetic reaction showed. He said, "Sorry. Don't mean to make light."

"Keep an eye on Mister Smarm while I'm off the beach, okay? Don't let him work his bolt too much." I closed the bag and looked around. "Are you all the send-off I'm getting?"

"It's not like you're going *back,* Kev."

"I don't suppose you know where Vick's got to."

"Off checking specimens with Cardwell, where else?"

We didn't shake hands. It wasn't as though I were going back. We separated outside the tent, and I walked disconsolately through the camp. There were voices in Rubenstein's tent: the poker game was gearing up. At the end of the jetty, I found Hirsch fiddling around in the boat. We exchanged nods, and I was about to get in when I heard my name called. I turned to see three people coming along the jetty, Vick and Cardwell dressed in hideous Hawaiian shirts—both his; there was sufficient material in the one Vick wore for five or six dresses in her size—and King tagging along, duded up as usual. He hung back as they approached the boat. Vick hugged me warmly, gave me a quick kiss on the corner of the mouth, and said, "Sorry we didn't get to see much of you today."

"Well, *you* have a day job."

"I just wanted to make sure you knew I had a wonderful time last night."

"Cardwell supplied the trilobites and the booze."

Cardwell sighed like an old steam engine and said, "I just catered. You guys danced." He handed me some old-fashioned letters, written on paper, sealed in envelopes with names and addresses inscribed on them in ink. "Didn't get these into the mail pouch in time."

"No problemo."

I stepped away, stepped down into the boat. King had got it all with the headheld. The boat pulled away from the jetty. Luminous in the golden light of evening, Vick and Cardwell waved to me, and I to them, and as far as I was concerned at that moment the only way the scene could have been improved—short, of course, of a last-minute reprieve for me and the simultaneous annihilation by lightning of Rick King—would have been for Cardwell to strum on a ukelele and Vick in a grass skirt to call out *aloha oe* while Bing Crosby crooned, Soon I'll be sailing. . . .

Back on the ship, I pointedly did not report immediately to Ruth. I unpacked, showered to sluice off beach grit and thwarted hopes, stretched out on my bunk, with an anthology of essays plugged into the machine so I wouldn't look just like some old bum taking a nap, and took a nap. I was awakened by the ship's getting under way and lay staring up at the major decorative touch in my little compartment.

It was a framed reproduction, given to me as a birthday present by my third wife shortly before she called me a bastard and threw the cat at my head, of a map of mid-Paleozoic North America as it had been reconstructed by Charles Schuchert and other early-twentieth-century, pre-plate-tectonics paleogeographers. They had, among other things, rather seriously underestimated the extent of continental inundation and postulated persistent borderlands separated by seaways. I'd always been drawn to the region labeled *Llanoria (Mexia),* comprising what I regarded as home territory, northeastern Mexico, southern and southeastern Texas, Louisiana, bits of Oklahoma and Arkansas. Disappointingly, where Schuchert had postulated land, later, better-equipped geologists had found evidence only of muddy sea bottom. Yet I remained charmed by Llanoria and the other strangely shaped, exotically named land masses, *Laurentia (Canadia), Cordillera (Cascadia), Appalachia,* enclosing an inland sea studded with lesser lands, *Siouia, Wisconsin Isle, Adirondack Island.* I think the reason for the enduring appeal of this outmoded representation was that Schuchert and his colleagues must have approached their task not simply with the idea in mind of mapping a prehistoric continent according to the data available, but also with something like the pleasure Frank Baum and Edgar Rice Burroughs derived from filling in their maps of Oz and Barsoom.

I went to the mess and glumly ate. Then I sat thinking that I really ought to go see Ruth. *Then* I sat thinking that I really ought to go visit Chamberlain on the fantail, and wondered what I should say to him about Vick, and concluded that I didn't feel like being disapproved of by a solitary drunk who hadn't been involved with a woman since the Treaty of Ghent, who hadn't even been ashore in all the years he'd spent here. Then I went to see Ruth, who while waiting for me had thought up all sorts of little jobs for me to do.

The days dragged into a week. Claire Duvall got shakily back on her feet. I took her on brief tours, introduced her to various people, and disliked her a lot. She was attractive in her way, with eyes so blue they were almost violet and hair so black it was almost blue, like a comic-book character's, but I found her irritating company. All she could talk about was what a genius Rick was.

Ruth informed me that other newcomers, "important ones"—suits, in short—would soon be arriving, too, and maybe I should become the official greeter after all, since I was so good at it, and this was definitely the time to upgrade my wardrobe. I looked landward and burned with the torments of the damned. I couldn't even get a personal message to shore—Sparks regretfully informed me that radio traffic was at an all-time high, all day every day the air crackled with messages, either highly technical or else coded, from the interior. I was miserable enough to wonder if Ruth had somehow heard something about Vick and me, was keeping me on the ship and off the air out of spite, and more nonsense in that vein. The wasichu, those unsociable, obscurely specialized personnel who were taking over the expedition, continued to arrive and depart by helicopter, mysteriously, sinisterly. The suits didn't come and didn't come and didn't come.

On the afternoon of the eighth day, there was a knock, and Chamberlain appeared in the hatchway, flask in hand. He said, "I got tired of waiting for you to come visit me." He gave me a closer look. "You sulking alone in here, or you want someone to get you good and drunk and listen to your tale of woe."

"I'm in no mood to be made fun of."

"Oh, come on." He was looking around for a place to sit. I moved a box of book chips, and he plopped himself down with a grunt. "Can I smoke?"

"I wish you wouldn't."

He heaved a sigh that was almost a whimper, fidgeted, remembered the flask. "Want a drink?"

I took a long swallow and handed the flask back to him. "I drink too much."

"Right now, you look like you can't drink enough."

"I'm about six minutes from going on a killing spree."

"Hm." He took a drink, stowed the flask, put his hands on his knees. "Our tail *is* tied in a knot today."

"You wouldn't understand."

"Welty, Eudora Welty, said that, whatever wonderful things we may do, fly to the moon, whatever—travel through time—we're driven by a small range of feelings. She said all our motives can still be counted on our fingers."

"You got that out of one of my books!"

"It matter where I got it if it's true?"

I regarded him sullenly.

"Man your age shouldn't pout," he said. He waited, heaved another sigh, slapped his thighs. "Well, I'm not going to try and pry it out of you. I'm your *friend,* schmuck. You need to talk, *talk,* I'll listen. You may find you're blowing whatever it is all out of proportion."

"I don't *have* a sense of proportion right now. Sorry, but there're just some things that're bigger than I am."

"Have it your way. I'm going back where I can smoke. Come join me when you feel better. You don't want to sweat out the storm of the Silurian in this little box."

"What? Storm?"

Halfway through the hatchway, Chamberlain turned and gave me a big happy grin. "All signs meteorological point to a big 'un piling up in the east. They're evacuating the windward camps."

He almost didn't get through the hatchway before I did.

When the boat arrived with the contingent from Number Four camp, I spotted Vick at once. A moment later, I spotted King as well. He had shucked his fancy beachwear in favor of cut-offs and a T-shirt. He was sitting beside her in the boat. They were talking to each other. Whatever they were talking about, she looked as if she found it very interesting indeed. I told myself that it was only clinical interest, but even as I did, the sharp barb of jealousy sank into my aorta, as I saw, realized, that she was holding his hand, there was a sick awful sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I knew he had novelty going for him, and sculpted muscles, and youth, and he'd surely let only me see him sick and whiny, and I hardly counted. . . .

Everything looked so ordinary. Everyone was tired and dirty. No one paid any attention to the new lovers, regarded them strangely or enviously or hatefully or any way at all, not even Jank, who sat at the bow looking gloomily preoccupied. What really drove home the idea that, somehow, incredibly, she was *with* King was her looking up, seeing me, smiling, waving, calling out a friendly greeting. She was radiant with guiltless happiness. I moved my hand at my side, the best I could do by way of waving back. Suddenly desperate to escape from the boat bay, I turned to go, and there stood Claire Duvall, staring down at the two people among all the people in the boat, with an expression of disbelief on her face that was only beginning to yield to hurt and anger. She looked the way I felt. I brushed past her and stumbled numbly through the ship. Someone touched my arm and said, "Hey, Kev, you okay?" and I made a noise, slipped past, kept walking until I was in my cabin, shut in.

I sat down. I exhaled emphatically, as if that would take care of matters, let me go on with my day, my life. Of course it didn't. I promptly found myself trying to pinpoint in memory the instant when the spark must have leaped between them. I shook those thoughts out of my skull only so I could wonder if she let him wear the headheld when they had sex, and if this wasn't strictly a short-term pheromone-propelled kind of relationship anyway. It seemed to me that world-view had to matter even between the sheets, but then I thought of Westerman and Hendryx's relationship, which had endured for years, and even prospered at times, in the face of major differences of opinion on every subject imaginable. I'd made so bold as to ask them about that, one time when we were sitting around ruining our livers, and received for an answer giggles from her and a dreamy grin from him. Pheromones.

I decided I needed some music and stuck Coleman Hawkins into the player. "I'm Through With Love," "What Is There to Say?" I could have gone with Cab Calloway or Fats Waller, who would've worked hard to cheer me up; at least I didn't choose Holiday and "Good Morning, Heartache." For all the difference it made. I went right on foundering in my tarpit of self-pity. I'd always loved women and the company of women. I'd had girlfriends since I was in third grade, lovers since I was in my mid-teens, a lifetime of love's ups and downs, ins and outs. Yet I couldn't believe how awful I felt *now*. I felt every bit as awful now as when I'd been a high-school sophomore and Judy Biesemeyer had broken my heart. Nothing had a right, I told myself, to hurt me as much in my sixties as it had at fifteen, and yet why, I asked myself, would I ever have thought that it *wouldn't?* To which I could only answer, duh, dunno, just stupid, I guess. And at last it struck me, I hadn't just been passed over, I wasn't just stupid, I was *ridiculous* was what I was, a lover boy trapped in a flabby, loose-skinned, wrinkling, balding, shrinking, crumbling body, and the best I could hope for was that she hadn't noticed how ridiculous I was, that she had thought of me the whole time merely as a sweet old gent, not as—

I glared at my antique map of Llanoria, land that never was, and decided what I really needed was a drink. I stood up and sat right back down again. The deck was tilted. Then it was level. Then it was tilted again, but in the opposite direction. I stuck my head into the companionway and yelled at the first person I saw, "The ship's pitching!"

"Storm," he said, as if replying to a child, and unhurriedly went on about his business.

On the fantail, Chamberlain was sitting in his deck chair and peering out to sea while his assistants busied themselves among the gadgets. I could hear people yelling at one another up on the helicopter deck as they lashed down aircraft. The ship raced with the sea and before a cool, moisture-heavy wind. Far astern, spanning the horizon, seeming to reach clear into the ionosphere, were sheer cliffs of dark gray cloud.

"Sweet Jesus," I said, "where did *that* come from?"

"If that's not a number twelve on the Beaufort scale, I'll eat my barometer." Chamberlain spared me a glance along his shoulder. "You look worse now than you did before."

I barely heard him. I couldn't take my eyes off the clouds. Then my pocketphone buzzed, and the bane of my existence said, "Kevo, get down to the jump-station. Those vee-eye-pees are definitely on the way. You've got just enough time to change into some decent clothes."

"They're coming *now*?" I was holding on to the rail with one hand and needed two. "There's a big storm on the way, too."

"How're they supposed to know what they're jumping into? Twenty minutes, dear heart."

I screeched into the speaker and tossed the pocketphone overboard. Then I said, "Oh, hell, I shouldn't've done that. Some rockhound'll find it."

Chamberlain said, "We won't leave a trace."

"Can I have a drink? I'm having a bad day. First—and now suits jumping in."

He handed me the flask. "Cheer up. You're probably going to be treated to the sight of very self-important people puking like cats."

"Some treat."

He took a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, shook out one of the nasty things, braced himself against the rail with his back to the wind to light up. "Hurry on back here when you can. You don't want to miss this, it's going to be quite a blow. We can't outrun it, despite what the Navy may let on. May not even be able to ride it out on the lee shore."

I said, "You'd be a much happier person if you'd get yourself a girlfriend," but the truth was, he looked happier at that moment than I'd ever seen him, as happy as Cardwell with his trilobites, Jank with his eurypterid—

—King with his icthyologist.

I suddenly felt so tired. This was the last time, I thought, I don't have another good love affair left in me, or even a bad one. I saw the rest of my life. I'd spend my time drinking and listening to people argue whether or not it was a good idea to use the Paleozoic to keep the twenty-first century clanking and sputtering along. Not that argument would stop it from happening. I'd hear Holiday sing another few hundred or thousand times of how she covered the waterfront, be dazzled anew at every playing of the Shaw or the Goodman "Moonglow," and hum along whenever the morning found me miles away with still a million things to say. The long, quiet Silurian summer would wear on, Laurasia and Gondwanaland would draw inexorably together, and the solar system would continue its circuit of the outer reaches of the Milky Way. I'd do whatever I had to do for Ruth to go on being a hanger-on here, and I wouldn't write, and if ever I found myself *seeing* anyone else whom I'd only been looking at before, I'd throw myself overboard. . . .

"Feel that wind," Chamberlain murmured. His long, thin hair whipped about his skull. "I've been thinking a lot about fetch today."

"Huh? Like with a dog?"

"Idiot. Fetch is the extent of open water a wind can blow across. Here we've got a northern hemisphere that's almost nothing but fetch. Wind, waves could travel right around the planet. Storm comes along, whips together a bunch of mid-ocean waves traveling at different speeds, piles 'em up into big waves. *Big* waves. Back in the nineteen-thirties, a Navy ship in the Pacific sighted a wave over thirty-five meters high."

I was appalled. "You're hoping we break that record?"

"Hm. About time we had some excitement around here." He regarded me with approximately equal parts of amusement and tenderness. "See how quickly your priorities are getting straightened out?"

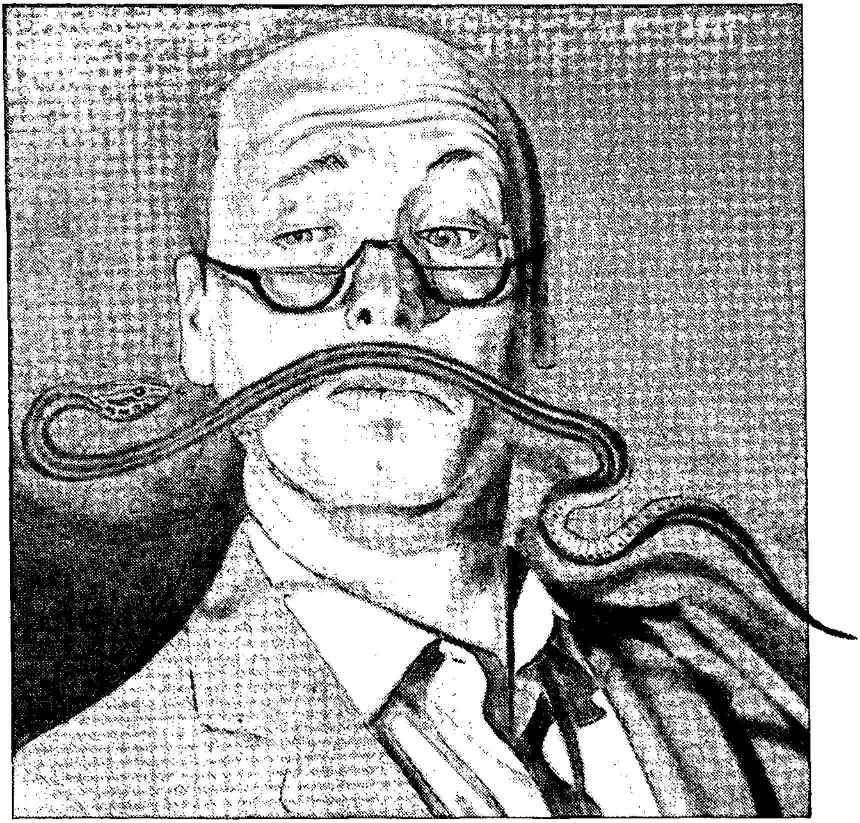
"Okay," I said, "so there're things that're bigger than the things that're bigger than me."

"Hm. Mm hm." For Chamberlain, that was a gale of laughter. ●

LETHE

After watering the grass, the hose lies across
the sidewalk like a dog's tired, lolling tongue
in the heat, and from its open mouth
water trickles onto cement and cuts
the ants' path in half. The line of water
is so thin—the ants could cross over it
if they dared. But ants are not intrepid.
Boldly they go, where other ants have gone
before. The water makes them forget
their purpose, and they gather like souls
on either side of the stream, waiting
for Charon to take them across.

—Lawrence Schimel



MY MUSTACHE

Ray Vukcevich

art:Steve Cavallo

Ray Vukcevich is a part-time computer science instructor at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, and a research programmer for The Institute of Cognitive and Decision Sciences at the University of Oregon. His short fiction sales include stories to *F&SF*, *Aboriginal SF*, and *Pulphouse*. "My Mustache" is his first tale for *Asimov's*.

In lieu of the whiskers, which never looked any good anyway—sparse and weedy like someone's neglected strip of lawn on the wrong side of town during a drought and after a yard fire—Lewis superglued a footlong garter snake to his smooth upper lip. The snake had some trouble adjusting and nipped his face often that first morning, and Lewis was, for probably the first time in his life, thankful that he wore glasses, but after a few hours, the two of them, snake and man, came to know and love one another. Lewis called the snake My Mustache. He would feed it bugs and baby mice and bird eggs.

Considering his bald head, Lewis figured he'd say things like my hair just slipped down onto my face. Maybe wink and wiggle his eyebrows up and down lewdly.

Ooo la la.

My Mustache would punctuate his points with its forked tongue.

He couldn't wait to show Tess.

Tess didn't like it.

That night, Lewis sat at his kitchen table, absently stroking My Mustache, eating pitted black olives, tempting the snake with one now and then, chasing away Tess's cigarette smoke with a Queen-of-England wave, making small talk, talking fast, and trying to convince himself that she gave a rat's ass about what he was saying. She'd stare at My Mustache like a hypnotized rabbit, then jerk herself erect to shoot him an icy look . . . then her eyes would be drawn back down to the snake.

"Must you stare, Tess?" Lewis said. "Put out your cigarette and eat your spaghetti. You don't like my Marinara?"

Tess jerked her eyes away from the snake. "Lewis," she said. "We have to talk."

"I know *that* line," Lewis said. "It's what women say just before they show you the door." He sang softly a few lines of "Hit the Road, Jack."

"Stop it, Lewis. This is serious."

"I know. I know." Lewis put his hands over his eyes. "I get like this whenever someone special just can't see beyond appearances to the *real me*." He opened his fingers to peek out at her. "It's not how you look that really counts, Tess."

"Lewis, you have a snake glued to your face!"

"You don't like My Mustache?"

She grabbed her long raven hair with both hands and pulled it away from her head like a tent. "I can't stand this, Lewis. It's always *something!* This is just one more way you push people away."

"By growing a mustache? You're saying I'm pushing people away by growing a mustache?"

"Ask yourself, Lewis," Tess said. She leaned across the table and put her hand on top of his and squeezed. "Who will want to touch you with a snake glued to your face? You don't want me or anyone else to get too close. That's what the snake is all about."

Lewis looked away, finally pushed into a sulk.

"Just *look*," she said, not ready to let him withdraw altogether. "Look at the way people are staring at us, at *you*. Don't you care? Can't you imagine how *I* feel?"

"Concentrate, Tess," he said. "This is my kitchen. There's *no one else here*." He pushed the wicker basket of garlic bread in its red checked napkin across the table. "Have some bread."

Tess bit her lip. He thought that she would try to convince him again of the reality of the people who followed her everywhere, but she just looked down at her hands, took a deep breath, and said, "If there *were* other people here, Lewis, they'd likely be thinking unkind thoughts about you. And about *me* for having anything to do with you."

"Screw 'em," Lewis said, deep proletarian indignation exploding in his eyes. "What made this country great is the way we're different, not the way we're alike!"

"This isn't a political question, Lewis."

"*Everything* is a political question, Tess," he said, and snatched up his wine and tossed it at his mouth, splashing Chianti onto My Mustache, who hissed and sputtered and spit and fixed Tess with smoldering black snake eyes.

"What?" Tess cocked her head to one side to listen to a voice that Lewis couldn't hear. "Yes, I suppose you could be right." She snatched the napkin out of her lap, tossed it onto the table, and got to her feet. "We've agreed, Lewis. All of us. We can't have anything more to do with you until you get some help."

He watched her walk for the door, watched her long legs move, listened to her heels click on his polished hardwood floor, watched the way her red-and-green checked skirt swayed first this way and then that way, saw the sad look she gave him over one shoulder as she reached for the brass doorknob, saying, "I guess we'll all just go away and leave you alone, Lewis."

"Wait!" Lewis pushed up from the table, trotted across the room, came up behind her, put his arms around her waist, and pulled her close. "Don't leave, Tess." He kissed her ear. My Mustache stretched its head around and looked her in the eye.

Tess screamed and elbowed him in the ribs.

He couldn't let her leave. If he let her go now, she'd be out the door and out of his life, probably forever. He pushed her toward the couch, moved in front of the door, and spread his legs and opened his arms over his head, transforming himself into a giant X to block her exit.

"Oh, Lewis." She sounded so sad and disappointed.

He dropped his arms and moved away from the door. He couldn't *force* her to stay. Now was the time for innovative action.

"I'll shave!" he cried and dashed for the bathroom. "Don't leave!"

Tess looked around the room. "Okay," she said. "Once more. Just one more time." She straightened her clothes and crossed her legs and settled back on the couch to watch the bathroom door.

Lewis was a long time in there, banging around and running the faucets and finally flushing the toilet. When he emerged, he'd put on a big smile below what might have been mistaken for a milk mustache.

Tess gasped.

"It's the Band-Aid, isn't it?" Lewis touched the white strip under his nose. "Well, it'll take some time for the, ah . . . residue of My Mustache to wear off."

But Tess couldn't tear her eyes away from the creature glued to Lewis' bald head. The turtle clawed at the air, moving all four legs and stretching out its neck as if it were swimming to Bermuda, but it wasn't going anywhere.

"What?" Lewis said. *"What?"* He patted the turtle. "My New Hairpiece? You don't *like* it? Is there *no* pleasing you, Tess?" ●

"Ancient Ocean Tanaka"

The sea is heavy
with antiquity. A bright
ring spans the sky where the Moon
once reflected light.
Slow tide murmuring a tune.

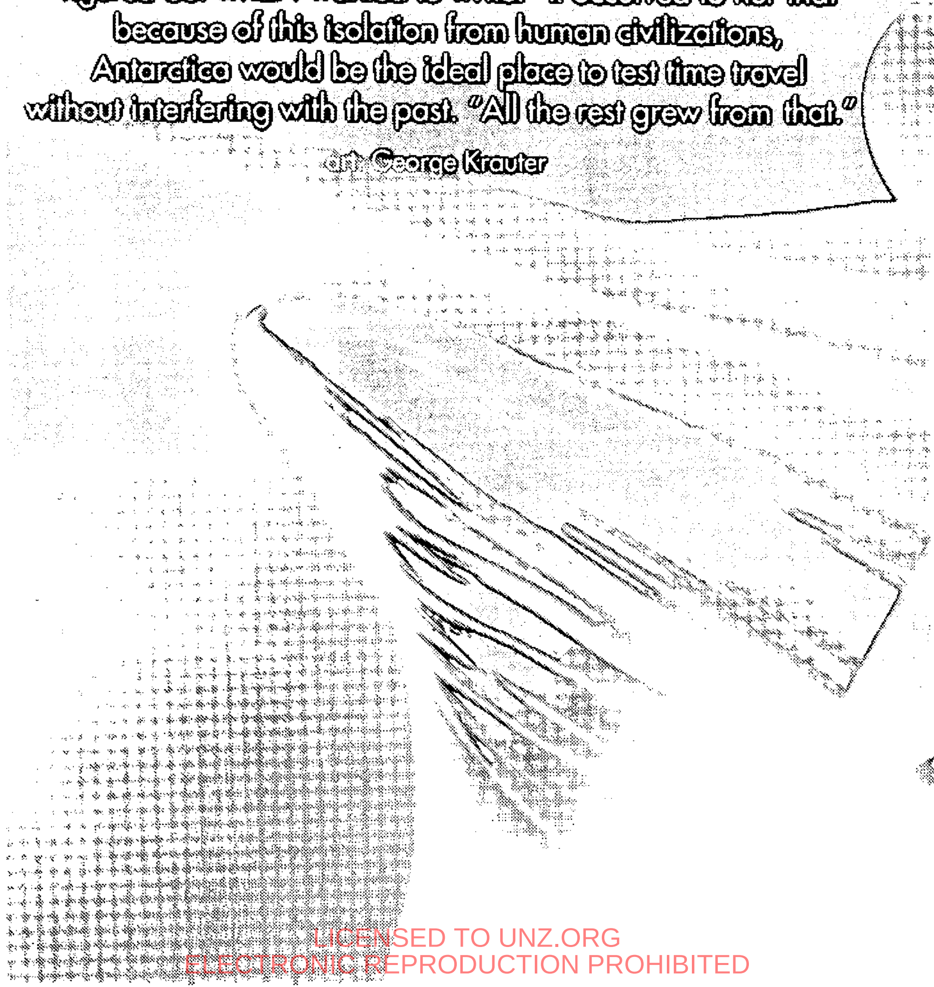
—Scott E. Green

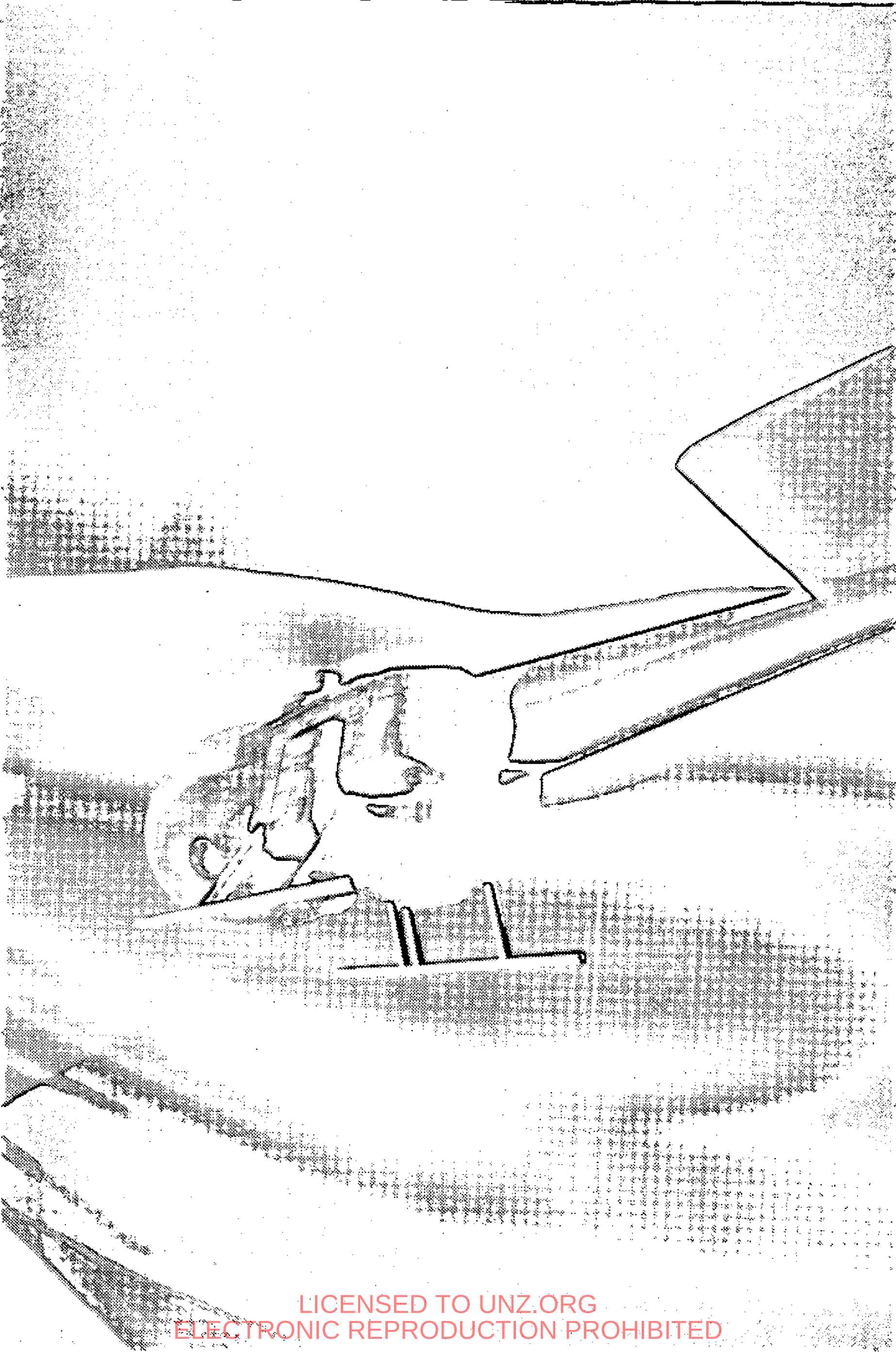
ICE ATLANTIS

Valerie J. Freireich

The author became fascinated with Antarctica after reading about it in an old issue of *Popular Science*. "The physical rigor of the place and its isolation really appealed to me, although it took a few months of research before I figured out what I wanted to write." It occurred to her that because of this isolation from human civilizations, Antarctica would be the ideal place to test time travel without interfering with the past. "All the rest grew from that."

art: George Krauter





I took the storm personally, as if meteorology was sorcery and I should have been able to control the weather. Matthew Bell, the helo pilot, must have thought so, too. Whenever the wind noise momentarily lessened and the turbulence gave him a break from rapt attention on the artificial horizon and his death grip on the stick, he glanced accusingly at me.

"I thought you said it was clear all the way to McMurdo, Ellen," Bell shouted. I'd lost professional credibility with him—he'd stopped calling me "Dr. Chapman."

The lift went out of the helo and we dropped like an express elevator. Bell's teeth were clenched and his fingers were white around the stick; he managed to stop our fall. My hands hurt from gripping the seat, and the 5-point safety harness—the kind used by aerobatic pilots—cut into my chest. Helicopters, even those sent to the bottom of the world, aren't built to take such a beating. I tried to think of some place between Vostok Station and McMurdo Base that was within reach and safer than a random choice, a place where we could set down to wait out the hours, or days, of the storm; there was nothing. I looked outside. Beyond the windows was white-out. It was impossible to verify by sight that we were in the world—if Antarctica even *is* in the same world as places like New York, or Buenos Aires.

"I'm going to set her down," Bell shouted into his mike, giving our approximate position, just in case McMurdo could hear us from so far away and low. Between jolts, I yelled my agreement. He didn't move his eyes from the panel in front of him as he fought the wind buffeting the helo like a weather vane in a gale. I peered out the window, hoping for a glimpse of ground. I was frightened, but mostly I felt guilty. The last flight leaving Antarctica, signaling the formal start of winter, was less than a week away. I shouldn't have dragged anyone out into the vast empty plain of Wilkes Land so late in the year. As a meteorologist I could justify the sudden onslaught of the storm by reference to Antarctica's very few reporting stations and its extremes of climate, but as a person nearing the end of a second summer research season, I was beginning to suspect black magic in this white landscape, or at least the absolute indifference of fate; I couldn't justify my decision to make such a final check of the automatic reporting stations. The data weren't worth our lives. The truth was, I simply hadn't been ready to leave this empty, alien place for an even emptier "home."

An intense light appeared on our left as suddenly as fireworks at night, streaking closer. It was harsh. My eyes teared and I looked down inside the helo; colored sunspots danced in my vision. I grabbed Bell's arm and pointed. "Go there!" I screamed.

It was an impulse. I had no idea what the light could be, but light like that had to be artificial—made by people. Bell glanced at me, then at the light. The helo fluttered like falling paper in the all-white air. His hands tightened on the stick. I think he nodded, and his concentration returned to controlling the helo. Slowly the machine become more stable as he descended and prepared to land.

A shock wave hit. I was frozen motionless with fear as we tumbled from the sky, but even as we went down, Bell struggled to right the helo. I will never forget that helpless, gut wrenching drop, like every falling nightmare of an entire life. Then I remember nothing more.

Someone was humming. I didn't recognize the tune. The bed was cozy; I lay still and listened dreamily, waiting for the alarm clock to ring. The cover felt like cotton flannel against my cheek, and it was very warm. I snuggled into the bed, then abruptly remembered falling, gasped, opened my eyes and tried to sit up. My entire body ached, but my neck and back were on fire. I cried out and collapsed onto the bed. The pain ended immediately after I stopped moving. White gauzy stuff, too fluffy to be bandages, lined my right side and I felt a slight constricting pressure around my neck.

The humming man, now silent, had turned to me. I gaped at him; he smiled. He looked like no one I'd ever seen, as if a vague amalgam of "Introduction to Anthropology" cross-cultural memories had been jarred loose by the crash and come to life. My rescuer sat on a straight-backed chair positioned at a shelf—possibly a desk. He was of no fixed race—he had Asian eyes, except they were blue; his skin was dark. His brown, not black, hair was cut in a style that looked as if a bowl had been inverted over his head and the hair beneath trimmed off. At first glance his arms appeared to be tight fitting, oddly decorated sleeves, but then I realized the complex designs were the result of scars, tattoos, and the insertion of objects beneath and extending from his skin. "Who are you?" I asked. My voice was a rasping whisper; my mouth was dry. "What station is this?"

White-out precisely like that visible from the helo before the crash filled a curving picture window. The window could have been an extension of the small room's blank walls except for the indefinable sense of movement outside and the low, steady sound of the wind. The walls were an ivory color, with the rough texture of raw silk. The light from outside was dim and there was no lamp inside the room, but the ceiling and upper portion of the walls glowed just enough that none was necessary. If I seem to be harping too much on walls, it is because to my Antarctica-honed sensibilities they were remarkable. *They were bare;* there were no shelves holding the crush of necessary provisions and equipment that lined walls in virtually every other room in Antarctica. I didn't see a door. "Where am I?" I asked.

The stranger's pleased smile widened.

Making a tight fist as relief against the pain, I struggled to sit up.

The man—his bare chest told me that much; he wore only loose pants—rose quickly from his chair and crossed to my bed in a single step. He knelt beside me, this bed being lower than most, and he firmly placed his open hand against my chest, pushing me gently down. He spoke a single syllable, "*Neh.*"

A throaty, disembodied voice spoke from the air. I'm no linguist. There are many languages I wouldn't recognize, but none of the countries where they are used have stations on Antarctica; this was an entirely unfamiliar tongue. He said *neh* again, but to the air, not me.

"Where's Bell?" I asked, looking up at him. "The pilot?"

He tilted his head to the right, listening without apparent understanding, but smiled reassuringly. I wasn't afraid of him, despite his grotesquely embellished arms and indeterminate origin. His smile seemed entirely sincere, and in spite of his exotic looks, he was a handsome man. "Who are you?" I demanded.

He bent closer, as if it was his hearing at fault. I tried to smile. "What have you done with Matthew Bell?" I spoke slowly and enunciated with care.

"Ah?" he said, nodding encouragingly.

I lifted myself gingerly onto one elbow—he frowned but didn't intervene; discomfort kept me from sitting higher—and pointed at the window. "The helicopter crashed," I said slowly. "I'm here. You must have brought me inside. There was another person. Where is he?" I held up two fingers, then one, using it to indicate myself. Then I held up the other finger and tried to shrug. It hurt.

"Ah!" He pointed at the bare wall opposite the bed. There was no doorway out of this room. He said something incomprehensible but earnest.

I tried to read his intentions in his expression, and only then noticed the tracery of thin, black tattooed lines that wound around his eyes and the sides of his face. I flopped back into the bed. The only people I knew who still painted or tattooed their faces were primitives: Pacific Islanders, or maybe certain African societies. This man, with his intelligent, reserved attention and his presence in some previously unknown Antarctica station, decidedly was not one of them.

I held up one finger, touched myself and said my name. He smiled and nodded. I repeated what I'd done and then pointed at him. Later I wondered what instinct made me say "Ellen" rather than my full name, or "Dr. Chapman." Generally, I prefer ample social distance. I smiled at him and waited.

He murmured something I didn't understand, then held up a single finger, touched himself and said, "Temas," a word that for efficiency's sake I assumed was his name and not his word for "man." I repeated it, pointing at him.

"Temas, *ya*," he said.

The same disembodied voice—it sounded slightly feminine—interrupted. He gazed out the window as he listened, then he quietly responded. He nodded to me, stood and walked to the blank wall he'd indicated before. It vanished. I glimpsed a much larger room, mostly empty, then he was gone and the wall was in its place.

"Temas!" I called. He didn't come. I lay back, staring at the white-out, trying to impose order on this alien situation, mentally reviewing the map of Wilkes Land as if, after two seasons in Antarctica, I had somehow previously missed noticing a sizable (by Antarctica standards) station on the ice plain manned by such a stranger. I remembered the brilliant light we'd seen just before the crash. Temas must have somehow arrived with that light, I decided, but the insight didn't seem alarming. Fatigue wrapped me in its calming cover; the bed was snug. I'll think about it later, I told myself, and fell asleep.

I was alone when I awakened next. I felt much better and entirely alert. I sat up without pain. I was naked and, despite the sense of well-being, my body was covered with fading bruises, though the fuzzy white stuff was gone. The storm still raged outside the window, but the room was comfortably warm. I stood and looked around. On closer inspection, the shelf at which Temas had sat was a keyboard. Most of the letters, numbers and symbols were recognizable, but some were not. I touched the keyboard and my hand went through it—some kind of hologram—and then the keyboard disappeared. "Temas?" I called. I remembered my nudity and looked around for something to wear. There was no clothing visible in the room, or a dresser, so I tried to pull the soft cover from the bed. It wouldn't come and, inspecting, I discovered it was part of the mattress.

There was a movement of the air. I turned around. Temas was watching me from the now open passageway, looking both amused and interested. "Well, get me something to wear, then!" I gestured at myself.

"*Ya,*" he said. He left again, although this time the wall remained open. Tentatively, I followed, peering into the other room while remaining just inside my own, less visible to Temas. This larger space gave the impression of a work area or laboratory; it was filled with windows—not to the outside, but two-sided screens of text (and many graphs or diagrams) hanging in thin air, a virtual display of information without the usual mechanical devices, and all so smoothly done that they seemed as real as had the hologram keyboard.

Temas was standing before an open cabinet built into the wall. Unlike the vanishing door to my bedroom, this compartment's open door maintained a partial translucence between us. He glanced at me, removed something and tossed it over, some folded cloth of a brilliant blue color. I caught the flopping bundle and held it against myself as I stepped outside my room. I had a pressing urge to urinate and scanned for a small side door into a bathroom, or something that would work. "I need a bathroom," I said.

"*Ya?*" he asked, motioning at the clothes.

"I need a bathroom," I said urgently. I gestured at my crotch, thinking that would be some universal language.

It was. He blushed and grinned with foolish embarrassment. "*Neh,*" he said, along with much more, as if I was a South Sea Islander of two centuries ago who'd made a gracious but unnecessary offer of intimate thanks and he was explaining his courteous rejection.

I turned red, too, knowing what was on his mind. "Neh!" I said loudly.

I crouched a bit, gesturing again, a bit more broadly, embarrassed and very much in need. "Bathroom!"

"Ah!" He chuckled, banging his head with the palm of his right hand, making the self-deprecating humor into an apology. He pointed at a chair standing near a side wall; it looked nothing like a toilet. There was no hole, and although the area between the chair's four legs was enclosed, there was no overt plumbing.

I pointed at the chair. "Toilet?" I asked. "Ya?"

He looked puzzled. "Bathroom, ya." He mispronounced the English word so it sounded like "batroam."

Skeptically, holding the clothing to screen my body, I went to the chair. It hardly seemed fitting to go out in the open, even in Antarctica where modesty is a luxury, but I sat down. I sank into the seat, like sitting on a sponge, an odd but not unpleasant sensation. "Oh, well," I said, and urinated. The urine vanished without wetting me, though the spongy chair did get warmer. I rather missed the sound of making water. Then I looked, unsuccessfully, for paper, but didn't really need it and gave up. Once I'd relieved myself, I giggled, looking speculatively at Temas.

"Ya?" he asked, entirely matter-of-fact.

"Ya." I remembered the clothing in my hands, and unfolded it: a pair of wide pants and a matching shirt cut like a turtle-necked tank top. I put them on, aware of his attention, which made my movements awkward. The shirt was made for him; the shoulders were too wide, and the chest too tight. The cloth was like nothing I'd ever worn, with the soft feel and bright color of silk and the thickness of wool. He looked away while I dressed, exuding the indefinable air of being a gentleman, but once the clothes were on, he came closer.

I looked at him, hands on my hips. "Well? What is this station? Where's Bell?" I held up two fingers, pointed to myself, then left one finger up and shrugged.

Temas jerked his head to the other side of the room and led me there. Naked, on his back inside a long, open-lidded cylinder that looked too much like a coffin for my taste, lay Matthew Bell. His face was mostly covered with white gauzy stuff, except for his lips and chin; so were large portions of his chest and his entire left leg. He breathed, so I knew he was alive.

Temas pointed at me, saying my name, then pointed to Bell.

"Bell," I said. I hesitated, frustrated by our lack of mutual vocabulary. "Is he all right? Bell, ya?"

Temas nodded. "Ya." He held up three fingers, then four and shrugged. I supposed he meant Bell's recovery would take a few days. He was watching me closely. I nodded and smiled.

"Ellen, Bell, ya?" he asked then, holding up two fingers intertwined.

I laughed, guessing at what he meant, then frowned. I was effectively alone with Temas and whoever else was in this station. I answered honestly, however. "Neh. I'm not involved with him. I hardly know him at all."

We both looked down at Bell. The white stuff seemed to move slightly, writhing. I reached out to touch it, but Temas knocked my hand aside. "Neh," he said, not aggressively, but as if for my protection, or Bell's.

During my earlier awakening the vague suspicion that I was in an extraordinary and fantastic situation hadn't been accompanied by fear. Abruptly, it was. There was no known medical procedure like this white stuff Temas had put on Bell and me. I turned away. There was no technological culture on Earth that made the things I saw inside this station: the toilet, the virtual displays, the strange doors and compartments. I glanced sideways at Temas. His arms were like a prehistoric drawing, full of weird symbols and off-balance symmetry. The black lines on his face jumped out at me like something a magician might diagram. It felt important to get away.

I hurried to the entrance to the bedroom and stood there, clutching the doorway on either side of me with a firm grip, looking out through the window at the other end of the bedroom at the dusky haze that I assumed must be wildly blowing snow; should I believe that I was still in Antarctica? There was no sense of motion, but what did that mean, really? We could be traveling through outer space.

"Ellen, ya?" Temas sounded concerned.

I turned back to him. I was not insane. I would presume that what I saw was real. "Neh," I said to him. I'm not all right. With great effort—if there had been somewhere to go I would have walked away—I stared belligerently at him. I tapped my chest and pointed at the floor, stamped my feet and said, "Earth." Then I pointed first at him and then the sky. "Temas, ya?" Are you an alien?

"Neh!" He grinned as if relieved, spoke at me for a moment, then he spoke into the air; the voice I'd heard before answered him. Whoever it was, she wasn't in this room. He spoke to her offhandedly, as if she was a servant he took for granted. Because of his technology, and although the voice sounded natural, I suspected for the first time that the voice was artificial. I had visited stations throughout Antarctica; I'd seen the men, and sometimes women, eager for conversation and some so shy that their shyness was a form of urgency. I knew. Temas lived alone. I smiled, hoping I didn't look sly, and counted on my fingers so he could watch. "Bell. Ellen. Temas." I shrugged, held up the fourth finger and looked around the room.

"Ah," Temas said and smiled a superior smile. "Lot." He waved around above his head, turned and waved again. "Lot."

"Bell. Ellen. Temas," I said. Three fingers—three human beings. I looked at him. Was anyone else here? Would he tell me?

"Ya," he said. "Ellen. Temas. Something something Bell." He smiled like a proud parent. I'd understood.

That communication, in which I'd controlled the situation more than Temas knew, gave me confidence. My fear subsided. We were still in Antarctica; of course. Temas was just a man.

Temas spoke again, then the voice—Lot—began speaking sentences, each different from the last, with a long pause between them as if awaiting an answer. It was trying out languages, I supposed, but I didn't recognize a single one. During a pause, I spoke a greeting in my own college Spanish and then tried the German, French, Russian, and Japanese phrases that I knew. I figured I knew fewer languages than his computer. Temas watched as I gave up. He said something I assumed was meant to be comforting, then looked toward his virtual displays and seemed to apologize. He busied himself at an area not far from where Bell lay unconscious, and almost immediately was working with steady concentration. Each time I glanced at him, the configuration of windows floating in mid-air had changed. Later he entered things on a keyboard like the one in the bedroom, his fingers hovering above the keys or barely touching them; that keyboard hadn't existed earlier. I didn't know how he called up the windows; his orders were spoken aloud, but they were brief. One time I repeated something he said. He stopped, looked at me, smiled and spoke a different command. Nothing seemed to have happened in response to mine, or it was canceled.

I wandered around the room, trying to figure out the function of the various real furniture and instruments (at least, there were a few things I could touch), but I stayed away from Temas with a scientist's unconscious respect for another's work, because on a subconscious level I was certain Temas was a fellow scientist. Something in the way he studied a display, the way he sometimes stopped and seemed to ponder, and at other times was furiously busy. He wasn't a technician, plodding through a routine task, nor an adventurer in Antarctica for duty, glory or excitement. There were things he wanted to know.

Temas's displays were often in Arabic-style numbers and I studied those the longest, trying to deduce what it was they were quantifying. I believed that I would recognize some of these displays if they involved atmospherics or weather, common research subjects in Antarctica, but if so, I didn't understand the scale he was using to measure them. I might have been an alchemist in a physics laboratory for all I understood. The only thing I found and identified was a digital clock, but even that had two displays on either side of it which moved at different rates.

I spent about two hours like that before Temas stopped working. I glanced at him; he'd sat back and was observing me, so I went to his side. "Radio?" I asked, not expecting him to understand. I hadn't seen anything like communications equipment, but I could easily have missed it, or he hadn't popped it out yet onto a display. I touched my ear, then my mouth and then my ear again and pointed outside.

He pressed his lips together. "Neh."

I touched his arm. "I think the answer is ya, isn't it?"

He stood and took a step backward from me, then glanced at where Bell lay in his medical cylinder and spoke. I don't know what he said. In my heart I heard it as something like, "What am I going to do with the two of you?" He sighed.

"Ya?" I asked belligerently. I motioned at my ear and mouth. "Ya?"

"Neh!"

I glared at him, but there was nothing I could do to force him to show me to the radio. I stalked to the far side of the room and scowled at him from there. It was impossible that this man, lord of a station filled with such advanced technology, didn't have a radio, or that neither he nor his computer knew a word of English. It was contrary to common sense.

"Ellen?" He rolled the "l" sound.

I didn't answer. What was the use? My inability to communicate with Temas frustrated me. I was sure that if I could explain our need to return to McMurdo before the last flight out then Temas would help. I felt instinctively that he was someone to trust. Then I chuckled at the idea of trusting a man with whom I couldn't speak—the only kind of man who couldn't lie.

"Ellen?" he said again, softer.

I turned my head away.

He sighed, then walked past me and opened a section of wall, creating a counter lined with rectangular containers, which he proceeded to open, as he spoke a command aloud. The contents of the rectangular containers looked like different colored powders; he mixed them in a shiny bowl, added water, then poured half into each of two glass cups. He brought a cup of the warm, cinnamon-scented liquid to me, but I didn't take it. He shrugged and set it back on the opened counter, then he leaned against the wall and watched me with a mild expression.

The drink had smelled good, and my appetite had begun to stir. A smell, like something cooking, began to permeate the room from the same area as Temas's powders. Careful not to look at him, I walked over to the counter and took my glass. It was cool to the touch, although the drink was very warm.

"Ya?" Temas asked.

"Okay," I said. The keyboard he had used earlier was still open, with a chair beside it. I went there and sat down. The alphabet seemed the same as English, except for one or two additional letters or symbols, and "q" was missing; the numbers were lined up across the top of the keyboard. Temas came over. I thought he would shoo me away, but he only handed me a plate of food. I shrugged; there was nowhere to put down the cup. He smiled and said something; a device like a rolling table came out of the nearest wall and settled into place beside the keyboard. I set the cup down, and Temas placed the plate there, then walked away. He ate standing up at the counter across the room, observing me.

I ate the food ravenously, a thin pasta with vegetables—normal ones, that I recognized: carrots, onions, squash, and asparagus—in an unknown green sauce that was vaguely peppery. If it was reconstituted, then it was excellently done. Afterward, I examined the plate. It seemed to be ceramic but, with a slow pressure, I bent it into a new shape. Temas smiled when I looked up.

I faced the keyboard with new determination. Gingerly, I touched the first key on the left hand side of the board, but lightly, as I'd seen Temas, hoping the keyboard wouldn't disappear. It didn't, but nothing else occurred, either. There was no toggle, or button, or dial that I could see. I said, "On!" but nothing happened. I tried "Ya!" but nothing changed.

"Ellen?" Temas was beside me.

"Teach me," I said. "Maybe we can talk through this."

He frowned, picked up my plate and cup, and went away. The table rolled back into the wall. Temas returned a moment later without the dishes and stood, looking over my shoulder at the keyboard. I sensed his presence as warmth behind me. He had a faint masculine smell, but nothing like the after-shave cologne scent or the stench of some Antarctica stations. He reached over my shoulders, so his fantastically decorated arms were around me, and tapped the keyboard. The device brightened in response.

"Thank you," I said, and lightly touched his right forearm, still next to me. His muscles tightened, but he didn't move away. Curious, I brushed my fingertips against the yellow and red feathery stuff that made a ruffle below his elbow. It felt like silk fringe. He pulled his arms back to his sides. I turned, looking up at him, and smiled. "Thank you," I repeated.

He sighed heavily, spoke curtly, and sat down on a straight-backed chair which rolled out from the wall, just as the table had done. He spoke again and a virtual window screen like those all over the room appeared just above the keyboard.

"Ellen?" he asked, his tone a challenge.

I studied the keyboard; I had no idea how to get it to act as an interface between us. Type English words and hope the thing, Lot, could translate written language when it hadn't evidenced understanding of the spoken one? I touched the screen he'd made, a blank expanse only made noticeable by the shimmering around its edges. Like the keyboard, there was nothing real to touch. When I took my hand away, however, my finger had left a mark. I wanted most to know where he was from. Some secret Polynesian island? Shangri-la? I felt sour as I ignored the keyboard and directly sketched a rough world map, with all the continents, misshapen by my speed but recognizable, on the screen. I glanced at him. His expression was studiously bland. I sketched Antarctica last.

"Antarctica," I said, indicating the place on the map and stamping on the floor.

"Ya." He gestured at the map location of Antarctica, the floor, and said another name, something like, "Sia Ourn."

"Ya, Sia Ourn," I said. Definite progress. "Temas, Ellen, Sia Ourn. Now, Sia Ourn." I waited a moment to make a clear separation, then patted my chest and indicated North America. "United States of America," I said carefully. I pointed at him and shrugged at the map. Where are you from?

He observed me without speaking. I repeated the entire procedure, then touched his warm, bare chest. "Temas?"

He stood, hesitated, then walked away, to the open counter. I got up and followed. Temas looked at me. I guessed he expected me to complain. I didn't.

"You wish you hadn't rescued us," I said quietly. "You have something to hide, but you didn't think that far ahead when you saw two people in danger, you only acted to help them. Thank you for that; you saved my life. I won't ask you about your secret for now."

He stood gravely listening to my gibberish.

I took a deep breath, thinking how much meaning a few words could generate. "Ellen: Sia Ourn," I said. "Temas: Sia Ourn. Ya?" I extended both my hands, palm up, not a handshake but an older gesture than that. I'd wanted to stay longer in Antarctica, anyway, and McMurdo couldn't mount a rescue of a downed helo in the middle of this storm. There was no hurry to contact them.

"Sia Ourn, ya." Temas smiled and pointed into the bedroom. "Ellen, *yoan*." He touched me. His fingers slid along my arm with just enough pressure that I realized he had wanted to feel my bare arms and that he had enjoyed touching me, then he gently pushed me toward the open doorway.

I was being banished. Dejected at having my overture spurned, I entered the bedroom. Shortly thereafter, the bedroom keyboard reappeared and a virtual screen began language lessons.

Three days later I awakened to a clear view of seemingly endless sastrugi, the wave-like patterns carved into the surface of the snow by the action of the wind, which were accentuated by the near-winter sun, barely peeking over the horizon. The light was low-angled and dim, throwing the sastrugi into high relief and coloring the snow in shimmering violet blues and green, the false garden colors of Antarctica ice, but beautiful nevertheless. I sat on the bed and gazed at the scene. It was silent, but for the wind; lifeless, except for things too small to see. Changeless: that snow was ancient. No new snow had fallen in parts of this high, cold desert in centuries; it only blew across the landscape, whipped by the wind. "Great God," Scott had written at the South Pole, "this is an awful place!" I felt that same dread awe of a place that made no compromise with man.

Temas hadn't come for me, but I got up and dressed. My ears were ringing from the relative silence after days of constant background noise from the wind. I glanced outside again. The crashed helicopter wasn't visible from the window. I wondered where it was, how far away. The doorway opened for me, as now it always did.

Temas was absent, but a thick pad of rumpled blankets were still strewn on the floor in a corner near Bell's medical bed. Temas had twice refused my offer of the bedroom. I was his guest, he had said through Lot. I was also a woman, his eyes had seemed to add, but that was something neither of us mentioned and of which we both were increasingly aware.

"Temas, *ila?*" I asked Lot—Temas called both the voice and the entire station by that name. "Temas, where?" I'd asked, practicing. Because of the nature of the language lessons given me by Lot, they were mutual, and, unlike me, the computer always remembered everything it learned. Temas, through some electronic or nanotech telepathy—or incomprehensible magic—had access to all the information Lot acquired, consequently his English was better than my . . . whatever. Lot called it "proper speech." There were some sounds, even words, in Temas's language I almost recognized, but I had put out of my mind any investigation of where Temas might be from.

"Temas is outside this compartment," Lot answered, in English.

Outside? I wondered. Or is there another compartment? I didn't bother to ask. Lot had a standard answer for my nosy inquiries: "I am unable to divulge such information."

Instead, I pulled open the food preparation counter. The cooking menu was difficult for me. Lot only accepted orders in Temas's language, so Temas had made all of our food. I had memorized a few instructions, though, so I ordered a meal from the day before and was pleased when the fragrance of something baking inside Lot's versatile walls immediately began to diffuse into the room. I started mixing powders, as Temas had taught me, to make his favorite warm drink.

"Tinepot," said Lot. Change Report. *"Docal."* Medical.

"Really?" I hurried to the cylinder where Bell had lain unconscious since our rescue. The white stuff which had once covered so much of his body was gradually retreating. Now it coated only his left hip and a portion of his head, where it looked like a jaunty white cap. His breathing had become more labored since the day before, but Temas said he was now breathing entirely on his own. His eyelids fluttered.

"Bell?" I said. I took his right hand in mine. He felt warm. I called his name again.

His eyes opened. "You're safe," I said and squeezed his hand.

He struggled to look at me through his obvious drowsiness, then sighed and went back to sleep.

I set Bell's hand back in the cylinder just as a wall opened and Temas returned. He glanced at me with a raised eyebrow. "Bell almost woke up," I said, walking over to Temas.

"Ah. Good."

"Where have you been?" The room temperature had momentarily lessened as he entered, and when I stood beside him a chill radiated from his body. "Outside? Ila?" Temas was half dressed, as usual, wearing pants without a shirt, so I knew there must be some other living space. Outdoor clothing is not stored outside.

"Ya. Outside Lot." His pronunciation was worse than Lot's. I found some comfort in that, since otherwise he seemed so much more adept than me at everything. He pretended to shiver, then laughed. I recognized the invigorating effect of fresh, cold Antarctica air after being closed in a station.

"Can I go outside?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Maybe yes." We both smiled. He had laugh lines at the corners of his eyes, but they were usually lost in the tattoos.

"Where did you go?"

His expression tightened; he shrugged and didn't meet my eyes.

"I made breakfast." I nodded at the counter, a peace offering. I liked that he didn't enjoy keeping information from me; it seemed to be getting harder for him, too. "*Etan* Temas?" Is Temas hungry?

He nodded, but first spoke with Lot, much too quickly for me to follow. Despite his cognitive access to Lot's data, all commands (from Temas) and change reports (from Lot) were spoken aloud. I guessed it was a failsafe mechanism, or relief from loneliness for Temas.

I wandered back to Bell. He lay quite still, but his cheeks had some color. I thought that I could probably awaken him again, but didn't. A *meca* came out from the same wall as that of the food preparation counter; it industriously folded the covers Temas had used as a bed, taking them back into the wall. I watched, but it still wasn't clear to me how the meca and its bundle, like the occasional furniture, vanished without opening and closing a door. "Is it magic?" I'd asked Temas facetiously the day before, but the word "magic" hadn't translated, so he'd only shrugged.

The meals I'd started popped out of the wall and onto the counter. I went over. Temas frowned. "You want this?" he asked. He wasn't as slow at forming English sentences as he had been at first. "I make better food for morning." He glanced at me. "But very good work, Ellen, to make."

"Ya, *matem kin, etem,* Temas." Yes, you make something, I'm hungry, I said, but Temas smiled in such a way that I knew I'd misspoken something. He tossed the meals I'd made into the disposer.

"Is there enough food to be throwing it away?" I asked.

He hesitated; translation seemed to take longer than speech. "Ya. Plenty of."

"For two, instead of one?" I persisted. "For three?" I indicated Bell.

"Plenty." He smiled a "don't worry" smile. "Not thrown."

Perhaps it was the sunlight, subdued as it was, but I wanted answers to the questions I'd suppressed during the three days of the storm. "How?"

He sighed and, his minimal work of food preparation completed, he turned to me. "I know how."

"Teach me."

"Later."

"When?"

We looked at each other, waiting for the other to break the impasse. Stubbornly, I stared him down and he was the first to look away. "Womans!" he said. "I have work to do." He started towards his usual work station near the medical cylinder.

"Temas?"

He stopped and looked back.

"*Gency?*" Please?

"*Gency hua?*" Please what? He sounded annoyed.

I lowered my eyes and went close; I reached out and touched his right arm, tracing the thick red stripe that was its central decoration from the mottled lumpy scar near his wrist to the edge of the silky elbow fringe. He didn't move; his breathing sounded loud. Wherever he originated, Temas was a man, with a man's weaknesses, and whatever phantom women Lot may have generated for him (though I'd never seen one, I guessed they might exist), he'd been alone for a considerable time. Against my principles, but, truthfully, not against my occasional actual practices, I played the game I mentally called "poor little me." Why not? Men have their own games. The guilt I felt was only because Temas was a man who hadn't played any games with me. "I don't understand," I said in his language, a phrase I'd perfected early, then in English I added, "Teach me; I can learn."

"Ya," he said. "You learn well, Ellen. I teach, but later, when we go. Now, here, you wait to learn."

"We're going somewhere? How? Where?" My fear showed; I saw it in the guilt reflected in his blue eyes. "McMurdo Base?"

Of course not. He moved away and I clutched at his hand. "Gency, Temas! Am I ever going home?"

He looked down, as if examining the soft sandals on his feet. "No," he said.

I'd suspected we were his captives, but his courtesy and kindness, and the utter impossibility of leaving during the storm, had allowed me to put the thought aside. I tried to maintain my composure, realized I couldn't, and ran into the bedroom.

He followed me. "Ellen."

I threw myself on the bed and buried my face in the cover, trying to muffle my sobs. He sat down on the edge of the bed. Lot spoke, but Temas gave a curt command and it was silent. I wished Temas would go away, and yet another part of me was glad he didn't. He touched my back, awkwardly patted me, then removed his hand. In his accented English he said, "I can not go home, too."

I rolled over, facing him, mindful of my tear-streaked face and wanting him to see it. "Even if that's true, you're here because you made a choice. I was on my way home."

"You were dead. I made a choice for you, too, Ellen."

I stared at him, so grim, his strange tattoos making his face a mask. I swallowed, remembering those last few moments of dropping from the sky, and afterward, nothing. No cold. No pain. But Bell had been fighting the wind and he had won before. "You can't know that we would have died," I said.

He stood and made a breaking gesture with his two hands, like snapping a twig. "Your neck was broken. Here." He made a line with his thumb across his neck. "You were dead." He gestured at the other room. "Bell would die soon—too many small hurts." He held out his hand to me. "Come eat food."

Recalled to life. The phrase echoed in my thoughts. I looked at Temas, the magician who had brought me back from the dead. Hell, hospitals did that all the time. It was nothing special to have died. Mechanically, I sat up and took his hand. He hauled me to my feet and I stood, swaying slightly. My weight seemed to have tremendously increased. My body trembled. Temas brought me close, holding me still against him, steadying me with his own body. I was glad; I rested my head against his shoulder. He spoke in his own language, saying very little that word by word I could understand, but I knew his meaning. He stopped talking when I was no longer trembling, and held me slightly out from him. "Ya, Ellen?" he asked in the shorthand way we two had developed for determining if everything was all right.

Is it a rescue when, afterward, you are held captive? It is captivity when the alternative was death? "Ya," I said.

I didn't bother with more language lessons, but instead sat in the main room near Temas as he worked. I didn't want to be alone. My life stretched out before me like the white desert surrounding us, but I couldn't blame Temas for the emptiness.

The truth was, I had been checking the automatic reporting stations one last, unnecessary time when the storm struck our helo because my grant wasn't large enough to allow me to winter-over in Antarctica and I'd wanted to stay. On Antarctica, meteorology isn't weather prediction for picnics and crops, it is pure science, divorced from human concerns. It wasn't Scott, or Amundsen, or any man who made this place epic and awful and grand, but the innate magnificence of the only continent on Earth on which no human society ever has arisen, or even inhabited the land, except recently, clumsily and mainly on the shoreline fringe. This was where I'd wanted to stay, because there was nothing I cared about or that cared for me anywhere north: a job, a condo, some papers to write, once in a while a man. I already knew and trusted Temas more than any of them. That future had been easily killed by my death.

"Ya, Ellen?" Temas asked every once in a while. His work seemed less hectic than it had during the first few days. He appeared to be engaged in different activities. I didn't ask.

"Ya, Temas."

He would smile and watch me for a while before continuing his work.

Later, I got up, feeling his eyes on my back as I went into the bedroom. I stared out the window.

I was dead, or should have been. Antarctica had killed me. I inched my fingers along the circumference of my neck and felt no scar tissue, nothing. No sense of loss. I believed Temas. He avoided questions, or he walked away; he didn't lie.

I lay down on the bed, pulling the cover over me although I was fully dressed and quickly became warm. The sun was imperceptible, a sourceless, faint light from below the horizon; the distant stars above in the dark sky and the cold snow of the ground seemed to form a tunnel. Soon it would be Antarctic winter and for months darkness would be absolute and constant. I closed my eyes.

It's said on Antarctica that everyone should have a lover, someone to miss them early and send out searchers before one is lost for too long. I'd stayed alone, yet for three days I hadn't felt that loneliness I'd had since childhood, the knowledge that you were replaceable, that no one minded if you were there, or cared if you were gone. I had died, then Temas had found me. I imagined the infamous ozone hole as an opening through which the souls of Earth's dead escaped the world into the greater darkness of space, flying upward and out on their way to heaven. Perhaps mine, so much closer than most, had already escaped and I was someone new. Not recalled, but reborn.

"Ellen?" Temas stood in the doorway. He frowned, hesitated, then said, "You are well now."

"I know." I held out my arms. "Come here, Temas." I needed to feel alive.

"Ellen," he said, concerned, but he drifted closer to the bed. The wall closed behind him, like a warning that there was no backing out for either of us.

I sat up. "Thank you for saving me."

He shook his head. "Neh, Ellen, this is not . . ."

"Ya, Temas." I stood up, went to him and leaned—pressed—myself against him. I kissed his neck.

He moved away, but kept one of his arms around me. "Not first, so . . . sad." He raised his other arm, smiled and took both my hands in his, and led me to the bed. I sat, and he gestured; I lay down and he turned me onto my stomach. I looked clumsily over my shoulder, wondering what he intended, a bit concerned. His eyes were distant, looking out the window, then he smiled at me, sat on the edge of the bed and placed his hands on the small of my back. I put my head down, turned so that I was facing him. He began to massage me: my back, my arms, my legs, my neck. He kneaded each muscle, he pulled and sometimes kissed, but there was nothing erotic; it was generous, caring. He seemed to like to touch my hair. Twice I turned and tried to extend his progress and each time he resisted, though when our eyes met I knew that it wasn't lack of interest that prevented him. Wherever he came from, Temas was no believer in free love, however convenient. Sex was a commitment that began with comfort and trust.

"I love you, I think," I said. I knew there would be no translation coming from Lot for something I'd never before said, but I hoped Temas understood.

That evening, Bell woke up and stayed awake. Temas left me alone with him, retreating to the other side of the main room after their initial introduction. Bell had gaped at Temas, his eyes darting from Temas's tattooed face to his scarred arms with undisguised aversion. Gook. I saw the word reflected in Bell's expression, deeper than gratitude, more intense than any respect the advanced technology of Lot might ever generate. "Thanks," Bell said, and that was it. Temas observed him unsmilingly, perhaps seeing what I saw. He had nodded to me and returned to his work. I was very conscious of Lot, always listening, and that Temas knew everything Lot knew.

"He won't let us use a radio?" Bell punched the side of his medical bed. I half expected to see a cloud of white gauzy things—Temas said they were "like meca"—descend onto Bell's hand.

"I'm not sure he has one," I said carefully. "I've never seen a radio."

"He has to have one." Bell scowled, absolutely certain.

"You saw Temas; he isn't like anyone I've ever known and neither is this station."

"Where is he from?" Bell asked. "Where are we? This station must be on a map."

I laughed, surprised that anyone who'd flown in Antarctica could have so much confidence in maps and normalcy.

"But why not let us radio?" Bell succeeded in sitting. Some of the white things still clinging to his head shifted position. "What's the point? They'll come looking for us now that the weather has improved, and they'll spot his station, however it got here. The ELT will bring them in. We can't be far from the helo or how'd he get us in the storm, even using those machines of his?"

"It's almost winter. The sun will be gone soon. Most people have left; the ice is already too thick for ships. The storms will get worse and no one will be able to fly. They might not be able to come for us."

"My buddies will come."

"I suppose you're right." It's that old frontier code.

Bell looked more closely at me. "You don't seem too eager, Dr. Chapman." He glanced at Temas.

So did I. He had a window display in front of him that was all text, but it wasn't scrolling. "We're safe here," I said, turning back to Bell. "He saved our lives. I trust him that he won't harm us. Maybe later . . ." I stopped. If Temas refused to lie to me, I wouldn't lie to Bell. Temas had no intention of releasing us anywhere that we might consider home. "Well, we're safe."

Bell made a sarcastic noise. "Once I'm on my feet, we'll see about holding us here."

"No, Matt," I said firmly. "No threats. We owe him our lives. We were already dead."

"That's his story, anyway," Bell said. "I don't trust anything he says, and neither should you."

"I do," I said.

Bell stared coldly at me. "We're only about two hundred miles from McMurdo, by my last calculations. We can walk out." He'd probably never done more than stroll the near vicinity of McMurdo or the South Pole's Amundsen-Scott Base. There are no tame places on Antarctica, but those come as close as anywhere can.

"*Only* two hundred miles—in Antarctica and winter? Impossible," I said. "Have you ever read about the Winter Journey some of Scott's men took before the pole expedition? We don't have supplies or equipment; we'd be worse off than they were. You have no idea what you're saying. None."

"You stay, Ellen," he said with what he doubtless thought was telling contempt. "Since you seem to have found a friend. I'll send help when I get back, if you still want it."

I didn't flush; I wasn't ashamed of wanting Temas, but then Bell said the one thing that could convince me to help him.

"I'll bring back your data, that was so important."

We argued longer, in low voices, but there was a knot in my stomach, and it hardened as I walked over to Temas. Bell shouted after me, something furious and ugly. "This is impossible," I whispered to Temas. "The three of us can't live in these two rooms, even if you do have enough food. Once he's well, we'll either drive each other crazy, or someone will get killed."

Temas didn't answer.

I ran my hand across his virtual window, wiping the characters. Temas looked at me, puzzled but not angry. "What are you going to do?" I asked. "Keep him in that medical bed for the rest of his life? And what about searchers?"

"No one will see Lot; no one will hear radio sounds."

I touched his arm, needing the physical contact as much as if he was the guard rail on a cliff. "You have to let us go."

"You?" His expression was wounded; Temas was a romantic.

"He'll tell some crazy story. I'll say he was off his head. It's Antarctica. No one will believe him and you'll be back home."

"Neh. Not going home, I tell you."

"You'll be wherever you're going. Or when."

It took a moment for Lot's translator to interpret my comment, or for Temas to pick up on it, but it was apparent that he had understood by the way his body tensed, his arms drawing close, his legs stiff against the chair leg, his attention focused on me in the way a predator watches prey—no, that was wrong. His look was entirely opposite of that.

"I didn't say anything. I won't."

His regard was unthreatening and unrelenting, then he quirked his head to the side. "Say of what?" he asked, pretending confusion. He was a very poor liar; it made me want to hug him, but with Bell watching I merely touched his arm. Temas didn't move or relax, but I traced the line from his wrist to elbow. Once one became accustomed to them, the patterns were elegant. "Your work is important," I said. "I understand that."

"*Yoan*, Ellen." Go away/inside. He stood up, facing me. The good Samaritan, except he'd also raised the dead, and now he was paying for his usurpation.

Bell was sitting, watching us from across the room. I couldn't stop myself from looking at him. His lips moved and I read the unvoiced word.

"Traitor." He'd made Temas into the enemy. If we ever got back to McMurdo, he'd want to shave my head.

I left them both, doing as Temas asked, and huddled under the bed cover although the keyboard appeared and tried to begin another language lesson.

By rights Bell and I were already dead; Temas knew that and it might be some comfort to him. I trusted that he wanted me alive, but Bell was a different matter. Temas wouldn't kill him directly, but he might allow him to leave, in winter, without adequate clothing or supplies. He might let Antarctica finish its harsh job. He might view it as necessary; he might believe it was his obligation.

Much, much later I was still awake when Temas came into the bedroom, moving with loose, broad steps against the silence of the long approaching night. I pretended to be asleep, and sensed him standing over the bed. He said my name.

"Temas?" I made room for him.

He sat down on the bed. I smelled alcohol, mankind's oldest intoxicant. It was dark in the room, dark outside, but there was just enough light for me to see his face. His eyes were closed. The black lines on his face extended onto his eyelids in a pattern of dizzying spirals. I wondered what they meant. I forgot Bell; he didn't matter a bit next to the unhappiness I saw in this man. I reached out and touched Temas's eyelids, tracing the design. "Did it hurt when they did this?"

"Ya." He took my hand, then set it down, covering me as if I were a child. He lay down heavily beside me. He said something unintelligible, then, "Family test."

"We don't do anything like it. Can you tell me about your home, yet?"

He didn't answer; we lay together in silence for a while, sharing the bed. The smell of alcohol mingled with his own warm scent. He moved, ending half atop my arm, which was pinned by the cover and him. I thought he was drunkenly asleep, or close, and tried to pull my arm out from beneath his weight, then he grunted and rolled over for a moment, releasing me. He raised his head and looked into my face, then brushed some stray hair off of my forehead. He didn't look drunk at all. "No," he said. "Not now."

"I'll tell you, then," I said, remembering my question. "Everything was fine, you were brilliant in all your studies and successful in your work, but you never felt that you fit in. Maybe you even tried marriage, once, but couldn't bear the intrusion. People can seem like nothing but noise, except that once in a while you'd glimpse a hint of the person you needed, and you knew that you were missing that person too much, so much that you couldn't see anyone else. It wasn't their fault, it was you, waiting for that person, someone else with the soul of a hermit, that you might have stayed with forever, except that you never did meet. You forgot, or thought it was a fantasy. There were always grants to get and apartments to find and students to teach who didn't care at all what you said as long as the grading curve was fair. You were glad to leave, glad to work in peace, and it didn't matter that you were alone because you didn't want any of them."

I had no idea how much he understood. He was watching me.

"And so where . . . whenever it is you're traveling—I saw the light from your arrival—or whenever you'll stop, or why, none of that matters, either. You're here with me now."

"Ya—yes," he said. He kissed me, his lips barely grazing mine as if I was one of his virtual devices that he must treat with utmost delicacy. He used his index finger to trace an imaginary line around my neck, ending in the back and reaching his fingers through my hair. "You are not a savage," he whispered, or perhaps it was Lot, whispering his translated thoughts, because they were entirely clear. "I forgot that early people are not children or pets."

I shivered, my hypothesis confirmed. Temas saw me tremble. He hugged me. I pulled us even closer. His hands moved up and down my arms as if fascinated by their smoothness, their lack of embellishment. Our eyes met. He cupped my face in his right hand. "I love you, too," he said.

I'd never believed that sex was important; I'd never understood why anyone sane would give up the slightest thing for the opportunity to orgasm. Sure, it was pleasant, but, so what? A bowl of ice cream lasted longer. With Temas, that night and then the following morning, while I didn't discover sex, I discovered that it was vital to my life, that Temas was. Matthew Bell was so far from my consciousness that I didn't notice until halfway through our tranquil breakfast of warm fruit and tepid beans that the cover of the medical cylinder was closed. The earlier knot in my stomach hardened into a stone. I pointed. "Bell?"

"Asleep."

I frowned at Temas and went to the cylinder. With the cover on, it looked like a torpedo. The translucent lid distorted Bell's face. Indicators on the side all were engaged, but there was nothing I could read to assure myself that he was alive.

"We go outside, Ellen," Temas said. "No one to watch Bell."

"You and I are going out of the station? Why?"

Lot answered, as it sometimes did when the message was too complex for Temas's ability to speak quickly. "The helicopter contains your possessions, a survival kit, and food. Bell will require these things if he is to walk back to your local base."

It was as I suspected. "You must have better things. Warmer clothes, lighter food. A vehicle, even?"

"Yes," Temas said. "But nothing of ours can be used. Nothing can be found with him."

"If you're letting him go, why not radio for help just before you move your station again, and let them pick Bell up?" This time, I didn't mention me.

Temas observed me without answering.

"Because you're not letting him go," I answered for him. "You're allowing him to die out on the ice. You know he can't make it to McMurdo."

"He will have a chance, the same chance your people plan for such emergencies," Lot said, calm and feminine while Temas watched me. "Better, even, because he has been healed. The risk I am taking in allowing this, truly, is unconscionable."

"You don't want him to live."

Temas sighed and glanced at the cylinder. Lot said, "I don't dislike him, but by keeping him alive, I interfered in history, which I must never do. I did not consider thoughtfully, I only acted. Antarctica has no past; I did not anticipate a problem avoiding the slight and occasional occupation by your people. Inadvertently I have created a . . . ghost." Lot hesitated before the final word, its way of letting me know the translation was inexact. I imagined some special future glossary of terms for time travel misadventures.

"Your people don't travel the past much," I ventured, interested despite myself.

"We don't travel time at all," Lot said. "This expedition is exceptional, and has a different purpose." Temas reached for my hand. "Ya, Ellen?"

"Neh." I could comprehend his having such temporal concerns, but I couldn't accept them as my own. Being alive now seemed to give Bell the right to continue to live. "What about me?"

"You stay with me, in Lot," Temas said, struggling with the words more than usual. "All is good. You don't touch . . . home."

"And if I decide to leave, you'll kill me?"

"Ellen," Temas said, as if I'd hit him below the belt. He stared at the floor. "Neh," he said softly. "If you go, I don't let you die. Do you go from me?"

"*Vala etyer,*" I said. Let's go outside.

"Ya," he said unhappily. "Vala etyer."

The helicopter's wreckage was nearly encapsulated on one side by the snow which had blown against it during the storm. Any footprints from my rescue had long since disappeared, but I wondered whether Temas had come out himself, or only sent his mecas. A meca was with us now. This one was tall, tracked, sturdy, non-anthropomorphic—its top was a searchlight lighting up the area—and it was clearing a way into the helo's cabin while Temas and I watched.

Debris from a crash is supposed to be ugly, but everything here was beautiful. I thought of the double meaning of the word "abandon." It suited this scene. The helo had yielded to Antarctica without restraint and had partaken of the beauty of the lost.

Earlier, we'd passed a rotor blade standing upright in the snow. It had reminded me of a lone palm tree in the sand, and this white expanse was our desert island to contentedly inhabit. Later I'd seen a section of the tail. We must have come down hard.

I felt dangerously naked outdoors in the flimsy gear Temas had given me, and paradoxically at ease. It was easy to move, not the effort it usually was outside. The pants were as thin as jeans and much less confining, although they were too long. The hooded jacket felt like a lined windbreaker, yet I was less chilled than in my best bulky outdoor clothing. The gloves reminded me of those a doctor wears in the operating room, so thin and tight that with practice the tactile sensitivity was probably as good as without them; they'd even adjusted to my fingers. Wind didn't penetrate the clothes. I felt slightly cooler than in Lot, but comfortable. With this clothing as an example of his supplies, it should have been possible for someone outfitted by Temas to walk to McMurdo in full winter.

The meca backed away, its work completed. I walked closer to the cabin. The passenger side door was missing and the entrance was rimmed with hoar frost, the very light, feathery form of frozen water which occurs if an exposed surface is below the frost point when contacted by moist air—generally it collects on human artifacts inadvertently made vulnerable to local weather, like some characteristically Antarctic equivalent of mold or fungal decay.

"I'll go in first," I said, glancing back at Temas. Behind him I glimpsed the immense Lot, lurking in the background like an ogre's castle, only half seen. "I know what we need." Without waiting for his response, I crawled inside the rear of the helo cabin. It bothered me that my passage scraped away the hoar frost.

Inside was not so pretty. Things looked broken rather than aesthetically chaotic. It took a moment for me to get my bearings, then I saw the Red Cross emblem on a bag, dragged it from behind another and tossed it outside to Temas and the meca. Bell's flight bag, with his charts, was beneath my left knee so I grabbed it, too, and sent it out. Perhaps it could be useful. I crawled past a useless radio-isotope generator of the kind used for unmanned automatic weather stations and on into the cockpit.

The moisture inside the helo at the time of the crash had formed ice rime on the surfaces. Around the pilot's seat, the ice was red. Bell must have lost a great deal of blood before Temas saved us. I laid my hand against the ice; when I moved my hand, Bell's blood had stained my glove red.

Temas stuck his head through the opening, bent almost double. "Ya, Ellen?" he said, and something else, then he came inside, blocking my view of large areas of the cabin debris and making me feel cramped.

"Yes." I looked around for Bell's overnight bag—everyone carried one everywhere on Antarctica—but though I found mine and tossed it out to the meca, I didn't see another.

My attention went to the control panel. The plastic covers over the various indicators were mostly shattered, but the radios seemed intact. With power, perhaps they would work. I moved closer to the stack, sitting down on the broken edge of the pilot's seat. I'd seen the holes when a radio was missing for repairs, so I knew they pulled out fairly easily.

With my nimble fingers in these ideal gloves, I felt around the panel, while Temas began emptying the helo of everything easy to remove, even the generator I'd disregarded. When he was done, he crouched next to me, watching. I'd pulled out one long rectangle. It looked like a safe deposit box that I was cradling on my lap; I hoped it was a transmitter and not a receiver.

"What?" Temas asked, indicating it.

"Radio." I tapped my ear.

He must already have guessed, because it wasn't the dry air that made him sound brittle. "No, Ellen." He frowned, searching for words out here where Lot couldn't supply them like a telepathic dictionary. "Bad."

"Don't you think your concerns are a little farfetched?" I leaned closer to him, covering the radio with my body, protecting it. "If one man lives who otherwise might not—can there really be so much harm done?"

He answered in his own language, sounding irritated, perhaps by our mutual incomprehensibility—or me. I pretended to examine the cabin again in order to avoid looking at him. My attention was caught by a disarranged pile of computer paper: my data, fallen out of its box. I didn't see the disks. Bell had said he would bring my work back to McMurdo, "since it was so important." Neither Temas nor I had bothered with it, the ostensible reason for Bell's being out on the ice. "I'm bringing it to Bell," I said, indicating the radio.

"Neh. Vala etyer, Ellen," he said. No. Let's go outside.

Bell couldn't afford for me to lose this argument and I owed it to him to try. "Neh, Temas! It's mine, and we're bringing it inside, to Bell."

Temas scowled and backed out of the cabin. I waited a minute, then, thinking I had won, I set the radio down at the doorway, jumped over it and outside, then retrieved the radio.

The meca was loaded with everything we'd found, like a mobile luggage rack. I crossed the short distance carrying the radio, intending to set it atop the machine, but Temas pulled the radio from my grasp and flung it onto the ground. "No," he said and kicked it. He looked at me. "No, Ellen."

I bent to pick it up.

Temas snatched up the radio and handed it to the meca. I smiled at Temas. "Thank you," I said, but he was giving an order to his device. It had arms, of a sort, like slinky coils except they were strong and had grippers on the ends. Those grippers were attached to the radio. As I watched, the meca tore the radio into two parts. Wires dangled from each side. "No!" I yelled. The meca stopped, then it simply dropped the two halves. Parts spilled from the radio as the ripped halves hit the ground: red, yellow, and black wires. I charged the meca. It grabbed me—very gently—and lifted me off the ground.

Temas and I looked at each other. He didn't offer to help. I was furious, suspended a foot above the ground, but I was smart enough not to make myself look even more foolish by struggling with the machine. After a moment, Temas spoke and the meca set me down.

I looked back at the helo. There were other radios inside.

"Neh, Ellen," Temas said.

It would be useless to even try.

I gazed into the distance. The light was just strong enough for there to be a horizon. Two hundred miles. "Bell will die," I said. "He's my responsibility. I brought him out here." I shrugged off Temas's hand and started walking back to Lot, about a half-mile away. Walking in Temas's boots required concentration; with each step they seemed gradually to lose weight, almost lifting me over the ground like seven league boots in a fairy story. They moved me faster than I wanted to go back.

Lot, gleaming white in the dark daytime, looked like a medieval castle. It was a place of odd angles and irregular heights. I'd noticed as we left, of course, but walking back gave me more time to contemplate Lot. To call it huge was a gross understatement. Certainly it was the largest manmade structure on Antarctica. I didn't understand how Temas could be so confident that an aerial survey of the helo crash site would miss it; that seemed impossible, but I had seen mecas walk through solid walls and I was wearing clothes in which I should have frozen, so I couldn't discount the possibility of some techno-magic-camouflage.

The odd shapes comprising Lot tried to resolve in my mind into something recognizable, and, like looking at clouds, for a moment I would see the outline of a boat, or the profile of a face. A platform like that of an aircraft carrier, although not so large, was visible near the top. The penthouse balcony. Rapunzel's tower, or Sleeping Beauty's. Had Temas put me under a spell? I couldn't trust myself with him.

The two rooms we'd shared were situated in front. A third, nearly twice their size, was the room in which we'd suited up; it contained a garden, probably the largest plot of greenery on Antarctica; it also had access to the other portions of Lot. Altogether those three rooms still comprised less than 20 percent of the station. What was the rest? A time drive? Temas's scientific equipment?

I knew more about Lot now that I'd been outside. Most importantly, I knew how to leave. Whatever it was to me, refuge or home, Lot was Bell's prison. I could take Bell out, but I didn't want to leave.

I heard Temas and his meca walking behind me. I stopped and waited, turning around. Temas was trudging head down, but at my movement, he looked up. I smiled at him. "Lot is big," I said, spreading my arms wide in an expansive pantomime.

"Ya." He sounded sullen. The meca plodded on, but Temas stopped beside me.

"Temas," I said, "you must keep Bell safe and alive."

"You want Bell?" He gestured at Lot, frowning.

"Neh," I said. "But I can't stay with you if he dies."

Temas shook his head. "I don't understand," he said in his own language.

"Let's go inside." I took his arm, intending to explain there, with Lot's help. My attention was caught by a shape perched to the side of Lot's top platform. Wings. I pointed. "Helo?"

He followed the line of my finger, then looked back at me. I watched him struggle with expediency. Finally, he said, "Ya, *cumbi*. Helo." He shook his head. "Neh, Ellen. No McMurdo *re* Bell."

"Ya, McMurdo," I said and tried to resume walking toward Lot.

He prevented me from continuing. He was staring into my face, then he glanced at Lot and back to me. He moved the side-flap of my hood aside and frigid air rushed at my face. I gasped at its intensity, but Temas bent close and his warmth blocked it. He kissed me, pulling me against him. I put my arms around him, too. "Gency, Ellen," he whispered. Please.

"Ya, Temas," I said. Yes, everything is all right. He didn't lie, but I did.

Outside of a cockpit, Matthew Bell moved like a football player, with more force than grace. As he stomped his displeasure, pacing around the main room, I was glad the virtual displays weren't really there to be knocked over. "Why won't he let us go?"

"I will," Lot said, on behalf of Temas. "You can leave as soon as you feel rested. I've brought your supplies inside. Take what you need from them. But I won't allow use of a radio."

"It's you, then?" Bell's voice, accusing me, was shrill. "Why do you want me to stay?"

Temas looked at me, echoing the question.

"I've got a wife—you know that," Bell continued.

I hadn't. I didn't involve myself in other people's lives, even where there were so few people, but knowing that Bell was loved only made Temas's plan seem worse. "It's suicide, Bell, if you try to walk to McMurdo. Or maybe it's murder." I glowered at Temas, my frustration rekindled in the face of his stubbornness. "He can do a lot better for you, but he won't because he wants you to die."

Bell stopped pacing and glanced at Temas, who looked directly back at him.

"I will not stop you from leaving," Lot said. "I will not harm you." I wondered how Lot lied better than Temas.

Bell turned to me. "Are you coming with me or not? Because I'm going. Our own supplies are good enough."

I bit my lip. "No. And you shouldn't leave, either. It's my fault you're here, and I don't want you to die because of me. Temas," I said, turning to him, "gency, Temas. Bell is my responsibility. Fly him to within twenty or thirty miles of McMurdo and let him walk in from there."

"Fly? He has a plane?" Bell looked around, as if the thing might be hiding in the room.

Temas walked to the food preparation area, opened the counter and made himself a drink, ignoring both of us.

"There's nothing I can't fly," Bell said eagerly. "Where is it?" He spoke to Temas's back, as if the whole business with the radio was a misunderstanding and Bell was certain our rescuer/captor would hand over the airplane keys to him.

"Near the roof," I said. "I saw it when we were outside."

"No," Temas said. "*Cumbi* is mine." He turned to me and sipped his drink. "Ellen, you understand the need; let Bell go."

"No!" I yelled, exasperated. "Why travel through time if you're so afraid of changing history, if one life can make such a difference? Why are you here, Temas? Tell me. I want to understand."

"Time travel?" Bell sounded puzzled.

Temas spoke to me through Lot. "Space and time are similar," Lot said. "We didn't have sufficient space to perform this experiment, so we used time."

"Ridiculous," Bell said after a moment, but Temas was looking at me.

"That doesn't tell me much," I said.

"I don't have words," Lot continued. "The large rings we've found are from this time—do you understand?"

I thought of CERN and Fermilab. "Lot is some kind of particle accelerator?" Damn physicists, with their big science cosmology experiments. Half the "weather" balloons in Antarctica this season were sent up to measure cosmic background radiation, instead of the mundane experiments that might better explain the forces at work here on Earth. "Why do it in your past?"

"Past?" Bell looked around as if his eyes had just been opened. I admired the speed with which he absorbed the information. "Oh," Bell said, and was quiet while Temas and I spoke through the interface of Lot.

"How far?" I asked. "When are you from? How far ahead of now?"

Temas shrugged. "I stop in another three thousand years," Lot answered. "I am less than halfway, almost two thousand. Lot can only go backward. A machine that interrupts the local flow, only does so unilaterally. I stop, check my location temporally and physically by mapping the star positions, by listening to the sky, and then I jump again. I thought I might continue, after the . . . *sisian* are made and . . . sent." Temas sipped his drink and looked at me over the rim of the glass. "But then I thought, with *cumbi,* we might find a harmless place."

I shrugged. The concepts were too odd, too disjointed to understand. "Temas," I said, "this experiment isn't worth a human life." I gestured at Bell.

"I came," Temas said, in his own voice. "One way. It is worth many lives." Lot continued, "Lot is unique, but travel through time is also . . . travel through space. With this data, when my people dig up the . . . *sisian* remainders from the ice, then they will know how to go quickly . . . up." Temas gestured skyward with his drink.

"To the stars?"

"Ya, Ellen. Is it worth?"

"You have to come back with us," Bell said suddenly. "We can examine this place—this medical thing—it will mean so much. . . . Just think. . . ."

His voice trailed off in contemplation. He didn't see the horror in Temas's expression.

"He wants to avoid that," I told Bell. "His future depends on his not changing anything in his past. We were already dead when he found us, from the crash, so we have to stay dead as far as everyone here is concerned."

Bell's face reddened. "You asshole!" Bell shouted at Temas. "*You caused the crash!* The only reason we died—if we really did—was because of the shock wave from your . . . thing here. We were doing fine. We were going to land and sit out the storm. No problem; we had supplies. You killed us. You!"

I closed my eyes and reviewed the moments just before the crash, but I wasn't a pilot and didn't really know how much or little control Bell had. The ride had been violent; Bell had been tense. There must have been actual danger. Our rotors *could* have snapped and we'd have fallen like a rock, but *would* that have happened without the additional turbulent stress of the shock wave from Lot? Could we have survived the storm? Would we have been rescued in time if we had? "Temas?" I whispered.

"I don't know," he said. His face was pale. He pressed the glass against his forehead, then set it down. "I am aware of this possibility."

"Then let him go! For God's sake, Temas, if you don't know, then let Bell leave. No one will ever believe a story about you and Lot, anyway. It'll just be another tall tale, and an unexplained death; no one there cares about me. Take him twenty miles from McMurdo and let him go!"

"And you, Ellen?"

"I told you. I want to stay."

Temas shook his head. "Then always the past is half wrong. One alive, and one gone, with a strange story. No."

I went back to him and took his hands in mine. "If you make a mistake, then let it be one on the side of life—just as it was the first time," I said. "You saved us, when your logic argued we should have stayed dead. If you don't know whether he's supposed to live or die, then save Bell again. You would if it was me." I rubbed my thumb along the thick red line that went up his arm. Temas sighed.

"It's already over," Bell said. "You're damned if you do and damned if you don't. You might as well come in from the ice, too."

"No," Lot said, while Temas continued to watch me. "If there is interference, it must be the smallest. The local time must not know I came. Bell still cannot return."

"I won't tell anyone," Bell said quickly, obviously lying, but his expression hardened as my statements about Temas's intentions toward him were confirmed. His fists clenched at his sides.

Temas touched my cheek with his finger, tracing a pattern there that only he could see, then he shook his head. "I will think about this," he said, and picked up his drink. He started walking toward the bedroom.

"Don't you walk away from me!" Bell said. Temas turned. Bell lunged and punched him solidly in the jaw.

The drink fell, shattering the glass and filling the room with an alcoholic scent. Temas didn't fall, however, though his head snapped back and his jaw was red. He went into a fighter's crouch, facing Bell.

Bell charged him. I didn't understand the reason because I'd felt intuitively certain that Temas would soon have agreed to help Bell reach safety, but in a moment they were in a battle. With the liquor smell and lack of clear logic, it seemed like a barroom brawl.

Bell was younger and larger, but Temas was quicker and used some moves I didn't follow. Bell swung and missed another punch to Temas's jaw, then Temas grabbed Bell's arm and pitched him onto his back. Temas jumped down, but Bell rolled aside, and the two grappled on the floor. They both seemed determined to seriously hurt each other.

And me? Where was Ellen Chapman, Ph.D.? I was doing a Dale Arden imitation, hands to my mouth, watching motionless with horror, not because I didn't know how to fight, and not because I couldn't have been of help, but because I couldn't choose which side was mine. Both men had a claim on me.

Temas disengaged quickly and cleanly, vaulting backward. Windows vanished as he and Bell passed through them. The drink had puddled just at the place Temas stood, however. When Bell attacked, Temas twisted to the right, and kept going too far. Bell reached him, pushed him down and pinned him to the floor, slapping him so hard his head rebounded.

"Get a rope, get something to tie him with!" Bell didn't even look at me.

"No," I said, backing away from them. I tried to think of what I should do. Temas was studying Bell. "Let him go," I said.

Temas started to speak. Bell slammed his head against the floor again, then covered Temas's mouth with his left hand. Temas writhed under Bell, struggling to break free, but Bell was atop him and a larger man. There was blood in Temas's hair, and on the ground beneath his head. "Shut up!" Bell said. "You're not giving that computer any orders, understand?" He turned to me. "Get me something, now!"

I hesitated. A meca came from the wall, but then it stood inert, lacking further instructions. Bell glanced at the movement, and Temas kneed him in the groin. Bell gasped; Temas twisted and nearly freed himself. "Come on!" Bell said. "If you don't, I'll have to kill him."

I believed Bell would. "There isn't anything. . . ."

"Use your shirt, God damn it!"

I pulled it off, and with that movement, I was committed to helping him. I approached them warily, Temas temporarily quiescent as he watched me.

"Rip the shirt in half!" Bell ordered.

I tried, but it wouldn't tear. "I'll get another!" I wanted to get away from them, to think.

"Gag him first," Bell said.

I knelt beside them. Temas wasn't fighting Bell; he stared as if blaming me. If I hadn't made such a fuss, then Bell would simply have left. Bell inched his hand away from Temas's mouth. I saw blood there, too, dripping red; Temas had bitten Bell. Temas tried to say something. Bell grabbed the shirt and thrust it deep into Temas's mouth. Temas coughed, but Bell placed his hand over the gag. Temas stared at me; he'd been betrayed.

"Let him go, Matt. He was going to help you. He saved your life."

"No!" Bell lifted Temas's upper body from the floor and slammed him down. Temas shuddered and his eyes went blank, then closed, unconscious. Bell turned to me. "You listen, now. I'm going back. I'm taking that plane you saw, and you're coming with me. His equipment needs to be *told* what to do and you know his language. Right?"

Temas was still breathing; I felt his face. It was sweaty, cool. Bell pushed me; I stared at him, unable to remember what he wanted. "I only know a few words," I said. "Bell, put him in the medical cylinder, please!"

"Forget it. We'll tie him up and leave."

"I want to stay!"

"Shut up! I don't give a damn what you want. I don't give a damn about this tattooed-up lover of yours, either. This place is too valuable to let get away, and he'll run with it if I let him. So I'll tie him up or kill him. Which is it, Ellen?"

Wordlessly, I went to the wardrobe compartment and got some clothes. It was an awkward, close contact situation as Bell tied Temas's arms and legs with his own extra pants and shirts, then tied the gag deeply into his mouth. Midway through the job, Temas groaned and opened his eyes, but he lay still, never looking at me, as Bell bound him.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I have to help him. I don't want you to die."

"This place has no security at all," Bell said as he straightened. He kicked the meca and it retreated from him, but it did nothing more.

"This is Antarctica; there aren't any people," I said, defending Lot's designers. "They didn't expect a problem."

Bell shrugged. "Where's this plane? The sooner we get out of here, the sooner we'll be back."

"I saw it from outside; I don't know the inside passages to take." I lifted Temas's head from the floor. He made a sound, muffled by the gag. I didn't know what to do. There was blood on my hands.

Bell glanced down at me, leering at my bare breasts. "You're coming. We're going home." He pulled me away from Temas. The best I could do was set him back down without letting his head bump the floor too hard.

"We still should bring warm clothes and food," I said to Bell, covering myself with my arms. "A tent—the helo's entire survival equipment. How do you know you can fly an airplane from the future? Maybe we should walk."

"No way." He was jovial. "Not with wings available." He shook his head and smiled, looking down at Temas's prone figure. "An airplane will have a manual back-up system. All I've got to do is get it airborne." He glanced at me again and grimaced. "Get dressed."

I returned to the open wardrobe and put on another of Temas's shirts, a red one. The food compartment was still open; a smell like baking bread was rising into the air. The fragrance made a sour taste in the back of my mouth.

Bell clapped his hands together. "We'll get a fortune for discovering this place!"

I swallowed hard, but didn't say a word.

"Where's my stuff?" he asked, restlessly pacing the room, inspecting the blank walls suspiciously.

"Theirs is better," I volunteered. "The clothing is warmer and more comfortable." Then I was sorry I had spoken.

"Wear whatever you want. I'm wearing my own, but we should bring back something to prove our story."

"The plane will be enough. His clothes look normal."

"Come on," Bell said. "Open the door to the outside room."

He was standing in the wrong place; I showed him and he went into the third room. I hurried over to Temas, but Bell came back. I looked up guiltily.

"Come on."

I took a deep breath. Temas was watching me. "No," I said. "I won't help you if you leave him here like this, or if you kill him. He saved our lives. He needs help and I'm going to put him in that medical cylinder."

"Ellen . . ."

I hated the whine in the way Bell said my name. Temas was turned on his side, looking at me, eyes wide and hostile. I understood: if people from our time got possession of Lot, then his future world could be destroyed.

I knelt, resting my hand on his shoulder. "Ya, Temas," I said, then I looked up at Bell. "Agreed?"

"I don't trust you," he said.

"If you don't help him, then when we come back with other people, they'll know that you murdered him."

"All right," Bell said. He lifted Temas and carried him to the medical cylinder. I opened the cover and Bell dropped Temas inside. "Satisfied?" Bell asked.

"Okay."

Bell walked into the other room, but I knew he'd return to be sure I didn't untie Temas, so I didn't. I leaned over Temas. "Will the medical cylinder dissolve the clothing, the ties?" I asked. I'd guessed—hoped—it would, since Bell and I had been naked under the white fuzzy medical things.

Temas nodded. His attention seemed less hostile, but he struggled. He wanted me to untie the gag.

"I can't," I said. "You'd kill each other now; most likely he'd kill you. I'm sorry," I said. I bent down and kissed his cheek above the gag. He didn't move, but he kept watching me. "No one will come," I said. "However I have to do it, I swear, no one will come to Lot. When you get free, then get away. Move to another time." I was crying. I didn't want to leave; I knew I'd never see him again. "If you can wait—if you still want me . . ." I whispered, then I stopped. It was cruel to continue, too hard on us both. "Do what you have to do."

Temas turned his face away from mine. The white medical things were already swarming around his head.

I didn't say anything more; I only left him.

Bell found the plane high up atop Lot; I was in a daze as we looked, thinking of Temas. The climb was strenuous, but it seemed as though an outside passage had been anticipated and there were places where there were even handholds to the tiny landing field. Once there, the plane itself didn't look too terribly exotic. It had one seat. "I'll stay," I said.

"Get in the cargo area." Bell sounded grim. The control panel was blank except for a red button. There was no wheel or stick, no artificial horizon, nothing. I knew the controls were probably virtual, but Bell was finally uneasy and I felt no need to comfort him.

I crawled into the rear compartment. The ribbing of the structure was visible on the unfinished interior surface; there were straps for attaching cargo. I tied myself to one.

"It won't be controlled by Lot," I said. "It must be independent, since it's meant to travel far away, outside."

Without warning me, Bell pressed the red button.

A voice—not Lot—began to count. "Numbers!" I shouted at Bell.

Displays had appeared in front of him, which he was studying intently. The counting paused. "Tell it to go," Bell said.

"Vala!" I shouted. Let's go. The hesitation continued. "Vala etyer!"

Perhaps something was supposed to have been done during that pause, because although counting resumed, my order seemed to have made no difference. At "one" we launched.

I was suddenly weightless, floating on my strap. Bell seemed secure in his seat, but he didn't do anything at all. There was no sensation of acceleration. From my vantage I could see out part of the front window but we were moving too slowly to notice a shift in the stars. I did know we were moving, however, since there were a few gentle bumps, though nothing like what we'd felt in the helo.

"Are we going in the right direction?" I called.

Bell didn't answer. He was hunched in his chair, still inspecting the displays. Anxiously, I tried to see them, too, but couldn't.

The airplane felt like it was gliding through the air. There was no noise, nor any vibration from an engine. I strained, trying to see behind us, to determine our speed relative to Lot, but Lot was gone, or invisible. "Bell?" I called.

"Shut up," he said.

The shadow of his arm reached across the displays. He touched something. There was an abrupt change in the posture of the plane; I was floating sideways and the plane began to turn. Then, more slowly, the plane righted itself.

"Got it!" Bell shouted. "First fly, then navigate. We're going home." He peered out into the sky. We'd brought his flight bag and I pushed the topmost sheets of paper toward him, but he ignored them.

Cautiously, he began another turn. This one seemed to take forever, but when it stopped just as gradually as it had begun, I began to have confidence that he knew what he was doing. I floated in the plane and closed my eyes.

We were heading back to McMurdo, back into the real world. There would be a fuss when we arrived, an investigation if Matthew Bell's story was believed, and if it wasn't to be believed, I had to find some explanation for the *cumbi* he was piloting there and for our absence.

The only factor on my side, protecting Temas, was the approach of winter. There would be few people left on the continent, at most five hundred, and it would be difficult for more to come. If I destroyed Temas's plane before many people saw it, then it would be Bell's story against mine and in the long, dark Antarctica winter night, no one would much want to believe in a bogey-man from the future, with scarred arms and tattooed eyes.

Weightlessness was making me queasy. I held onto the back of Bell's seat and pulled myself forward. "Everything all right?" I asked.

He turned around and grinned. "Nothing to it," he said, looking boyish and totally unlike the man who'd threatened Temas's life. "But it's slow and I can't seem to increase the speed."

I nodded and let go of his seat. The trip became boring. I floated on my tether while Bell studied his displays. The turbulence worsened, but it seemed to be nothing the plane couldn't handle. There was sky outside, not white-out, but nothing was visible anyway. There were no lights illuminating the ground, and the stars, even so many of them—I thought of those future people, traveling to them—were much too faint. I thought of Temas staring up out of the medical cylinder, a gag in his mouth that I'd helped put there. No matter what I did, I couldn't make that right. I'd never wished for anyone's death before, but now, too late, I wished that Bell had died.

"I think we're low," he said about an hour later.

"How low?" Altitude is an aircraft's best defense. "Going down?"

"Maybe a slow descent. We climbed for a while right after we left his station. I don't know how to change altitude; it's not the same control as turning and I can't find a power setting to adjust. I've tried everything I think is safe to try. Can you tell it to go up?"

It seemed to have escaped Bell that this *cumbi* hadn't responded to anything I'd said. Despite that, I pulled myself closer to the cockpit and looked at the displays, but the angle was still bad. "Vala," I tried again. Nothing. "How far have we come?" I asked.

"Not far enough. Probably not even halfway, if I'm judging our speed right—about 60 knots. Well, we'd have to land sometime, anyway." He reached forward while I held my breath. Nothing happened.

"Don't try anything!" I wanted more boredom, but he wanted to maneuver. "Just let it do what it wants," I said. "Maybe it's out of fuel, or something, and it's an automatic system."

"This thing doesn't carry fuel," he said. "Inside, it's all empty storage space. Look at those wings—there's no room for fuel. I can't figure how it flies, even with no guts, no real power."

The plane continued to glide serenely through the dark sky. "It'll be all right," I said. "The plane will land itself if it has to land." We weren't prepared to survive long on the ground. Bell had refused to bring much more than the emergency survival kit along because of the climb we'd had to make to reach the plane, and because of his confidence in his ability to fly.

The plane dipped; I thought it began a turn.

Bell swore. I couldn't see his face except as a dark reflection on the plane's displays. I didn't see what he touched, but the plane lurched as he maneuvered.

"Don't!" I yelled.

Bell's white teeth, grinning, were visible in the reflection. "He doesn't have us yet!"

My hands clenched around the seatback. Was Temas already free on Lot, and did Lot have the ability to remotely control the *cumbi?* I was afraid to ask Bell what was going on.

Bell began doing things to the displays, some of which affected our flight and others of which did not. I lost count of the jerks and minor tumbles, but they seemed to become more violent, as if the plane was a rope in a wild game of tug-of-war, then they all stopped and the flight was smooth again. I was relieved. Bell shouted, "We're going to land! Now!"

I snapped alert, but there was nothing I could do but clutch my strap and wait. I think if Bell had trusted the plane to do its job automatically, we'd have been all right. Instead, he tried to turn—I don't know why—and when the bank steepened and the plane dropped altitude, he became more random in his actions, and too quick. The plane never quite stabilized, but until the last moment, it seemed that we were fine. He never panicked. Then our left wing grazed the ground.

We cartwheeled on the rocks and snow somewhere in the Bunger Hills. I stayed conscious, but as we hit I stopped floating and was slammed into the airplane's sides. The plane came to rest about three hundred yards from where we first touched down. One wing was gone. A gash on the left side of the cabin let in the Antarctica cold. It had all been pointless. Matthew Bell was dead, again. Too late. I was alone.

There was no question of my walking out; my right leg was fractured. It wouldn't support me, and ached with the cold that attacked through the hole my bone had poked in Temas's fine clothes. There had been some chance of rescue at the helicopter crash site, but there was none here. If they were still searching, they were doing it many miles away, near where the helo had gone down. Since I couldn't walk, it was just a question of how long I would take to die.

Perhaps in a few years someone would stumble on this site and figure out whose corpses were in the bizarre, broken plane. By then, I wouldn't care; no one would, except for Matthew Bell's widow and, perhaps, someone who would then be living long ago.

I didn't know how to let myself die, so I occupied myself with the minutiae of polar survival, heat and food in all their combinations: a sleeping bag, although except for my right leg, Temas's clothing kept me warm; an electric stove, and ten packets of food to heat. I even got a flare gun from the survival kit and kept it handy, though it did nothing to improve my spirits. I almost wished I hadn't had the helo's survival kit along. After that initial work was done, there was nothing more to do. Optimism and constant planning for the future are said to help a person live, but I couldn't summon up the will. Maybe time was resuming its natural course, which Temas had interrupted, or maybe our deaths would bend the future in some inexorable way, but I thought it more likely that Bell's life and mine were meaningless to the greater schemes of the universe, that we were butterflies whose beating wings went as unnoticed as their absence. I didn't feel guilty that I'd wished for Bell's death and that he had died; I only wished that he had died sooner. I wanted to be back in Lot, with Temas.

I daydreamed the time I'd had with Temas. I lay, sweating in a sleeping bag I didn't need, fantasizing a different outcome. I traced the lines of his face in the frigid air with my finger, laughed again with every misunderstanding we'd had in those days before Bell woke up.

I didn't skimp on my rations from the kit, but I wasn't hungry. I rarely moved, because my leg hurt too much if I did, but I had dragged myself to the wound in the airplane's side, and sometimes I stared at the stars. Temas might be watching them, I thought, now or in some other time.

I dreamed that Antarctica was Atlantis, the land that had sunk beneath the sea. It was an old notion of mine, originating, I suppose, in Antarctica's ice shelves, those places where the ice is so heavy on the land that its weight has sunk the earth's crust below sea level. I imagined men and women all dressed like Temas, with tribal markings that made them seem savage, but who welcomed me with gentle arms, bringing me home in their meca-driven snow-sleds. Maybe Atlantis is a future place, with a resonance which echoes down to us through the lens of whatever catastrophe looms in our world's future, one which separates Temas's world from ours, making our present culturally discontinuous with his time. I dreamed those future Atlanteans cast Temas back to me like skipping a pebble on a pond until his path and mine collided. But they couldn't do it more than once.

I was still dreaming when I was awakened by a noise like rising wind.

I thought a blizzard had begun. Good, I remember whispering, but I peered out of the hole and saw red and green lights in the sky. It all begins with light—I recognized them. Helicopters.

They were coming closer, moving in a search pattern that seemed very precise. Almost with resignation, and since it seemed to be my duty, I found the flare gun. I didn't want to go back to McMurdo, and then up north to the life I'd left behind, but I shot the flare. Then I closed my eyes and waited. So I returned to McMurdo a week later than expected, but after the last flight out. I didn't care.

No one asked me much. They assumed I'd spent a week on the ice, and took my silence for fortitude. The people who stay on this continent in winter tend to be taciturn anyway, so I was mostly left alone. There'd been another storm coming, and the helo pilots hadn't lingered long near the mysterious wreck; after all, it was dark, the plane was badly broken and I needed medical attention. There are many mysteries in Antarctica, too many for all of them to be pursued. This was one that could wait for spring.

Bell's friend, a helo pilot named Mirabelli, visited me. I spoke banalities about Bell's bravery and skill and hoped Mirabelli would go away, but he didn't.

"Matt was the best," Mirabelli said gravely. He was a swarthier version of Bell and, strangely for a helo pilot, not so overconfident. He seemed disturbed.

"Why were you searching that area?" I asked, taking advantage of his presence. The doctor hadn't known. "We radioed a different position."

"No, you didn't." Mirabelli looked puzzled. "I heard your message, Dr. Chapman. It was damn precise for a . . . for a non-pilot."

I stared.

"Maybe you don't remember," he said, leaning forward in the chair he'd dragged to my bedside. "It was a tough time for you." I looked away from him; he scuffed his chair closer to my bed. "I've been wondering. That wreckage . . . ?" He'd been one of those who rescued me.

I was thinking of Lot, imagining Temas instructing it to save our lives—my life—again. I turned back and tried not to sound eager. "You got a radio message? From a woman?" I watched his face.

"Sure. We heard you. We were searching a completely different area, extrapolating from your last known position since we didn't have an ELT fix; you were off a straight line. We would never have found you there. In fact, we were about ready to call off the search. Then your message came, the day before we found you. We had to go back to the base, refuel, and then go out again."

"The message? What did it—I—say?"

"Well." He leaned back as he attempted to recall exactly. "You were garbled. You said there'd been a crash and gave your position. It was brief. We couldn't make contact again to say we were on our way."

"Oh, I remember now," I said vaguely.

He nodded. “About Matt. The doc said he’d only died the day before . . . I’ve been wondering. Do you think if we’d come faster . . . ?”

“You know, could we talk some more tomorrow?” I asked. Poor little me. “I’m tired, and thinking about all this . . .” I shuddered.

“Sure, Dr. Chapman.” Credulous, he stood up and replaced the chair where it belonged.

“Mirabelli,” I said, “how hard would it be to fly back to the crash site? I left some papers.” He frowned. “And there are Matt’s things. His wife might want them.”

“Well . . .” he said. “It’s possible, but it’d be tough. Easier to wait for next spring.” He edged toward the door.

“One other thing,” I said. “When you picked me up, did you radio back to McMurdo that I was alive? And that Matt was dead?”

“Sure,” he said. “Of course.”

I stared at my leg, in traction, wondering how long it would take white fuzzies to mend the break. “Thanks, Mirabelli,” I said. “And you know, I don’t think there was anything you could have done for Matt.” He nodded at me, smiled for the first time, and left.

How long had Temas expected to stay in this present? He’d never told me. Later, he’d said, I’ll teach you later, when we leave. There were many things I didn’t know, but I did know one. He hadn’t left immediately, and perhaps if he felt safe enough—with Bell dead and winter coming on—he still was there. He might be waiting.

He is. I am certain of it.

Winters are long in Antarctica. The cold is intense. No one travels unnecessarily; no one in their right mind leaves for a destination she doesn’t even know is there. But instead of crazy, say this is an act of faith: in myself, in one man, and in Antarctica’s sorcery.

There are fleets of powered sleds and tractors in storage at McMurdo, skis for when—never if, in Antarctica—the mechanical transport breaks down, and plenty of food and supplies stockpiled all over the base. I still have Temas’s lightweight outdoor clothing. I can’t ask Mirabelli; that was a foolish thought. I must return alone.

I pored over my charts, studied the meteorological records. There’s no better time until next summer. I may as well go now.

I sent a radio message; it was easy to get informal access to the radios here in winter. I hope he was listening. “*Ya, Temas,*” I said. “I’m coming. Wait for me. *Val etyer. Gency.*”

So now you know everything, whoever has found this message. I spent the days of my recovery writing it and now I’m gone. I respect Temas’s temporal imperatives, but they’re not mine, or perhaps we’re both just temporal chauvinists. If you believe me, then examine that *cumbi* plane next summer, if Temas hasn’t found a way to destroy or move it. Learn what you can. Don’t follow me. I have found the place I refuse to leave; I have found the man to share it. I’m home. I am just going outside and may be some time. ●

Lewis Shiner returns to our pages with a mysterious tale of husbands and wives and their unspoken . . .

SECRETS

Lewis Shiner

They'd been married sixteen days.

Michael spent a lot of time in the bathroom, as some of her other boyfriends had. So maybe it wasn't entirely an accident when Teresa walked in that night without knocking.

"Sorry," she smiled. "I didn't know—"

Michael was leaning over the lavatory, fully dressed. He had an index finger under each eyelid, pulling it down. A stream of blood poured out of the underside of each eye into the sink.

"Michael?" she whispered.

He turned to look at her. His eyes were rolled back in his head and blood flowed down his cheeks like dark red tears. "GET OUT!" he roared.

In panic she reverted to Spanish: "*¡Lo siento, lo siento!* I'm sorry!"

When he came to bed it was like nothing had happened. He kissed her forehead and went back to reading his trial transcript. He didn't ask why she shivered at the sight of him.

It was a week before she let him make love to her again. He was so gentle and insistent that she finally gave in. Afterward, while he slept, she stared at him in the moonlight, searching for strangeness, for some kind of explanation.

She never walked in on him unexpectedly again. As the years went by and she failed to get pregnant she wondered, sometimes, if that was meaningful, if it was related to what she'd seen. The thing that was never mentioned, the thing she tried to tell herself she'd only imagined. The thing she could never forget.

In the end it was Michael who left her. In the ten years they'd been together, he didn't seem to have aged a day. He left her for a younger woman, of course. Teresa thought about calling the woman, trying to warn her, but what could she say?

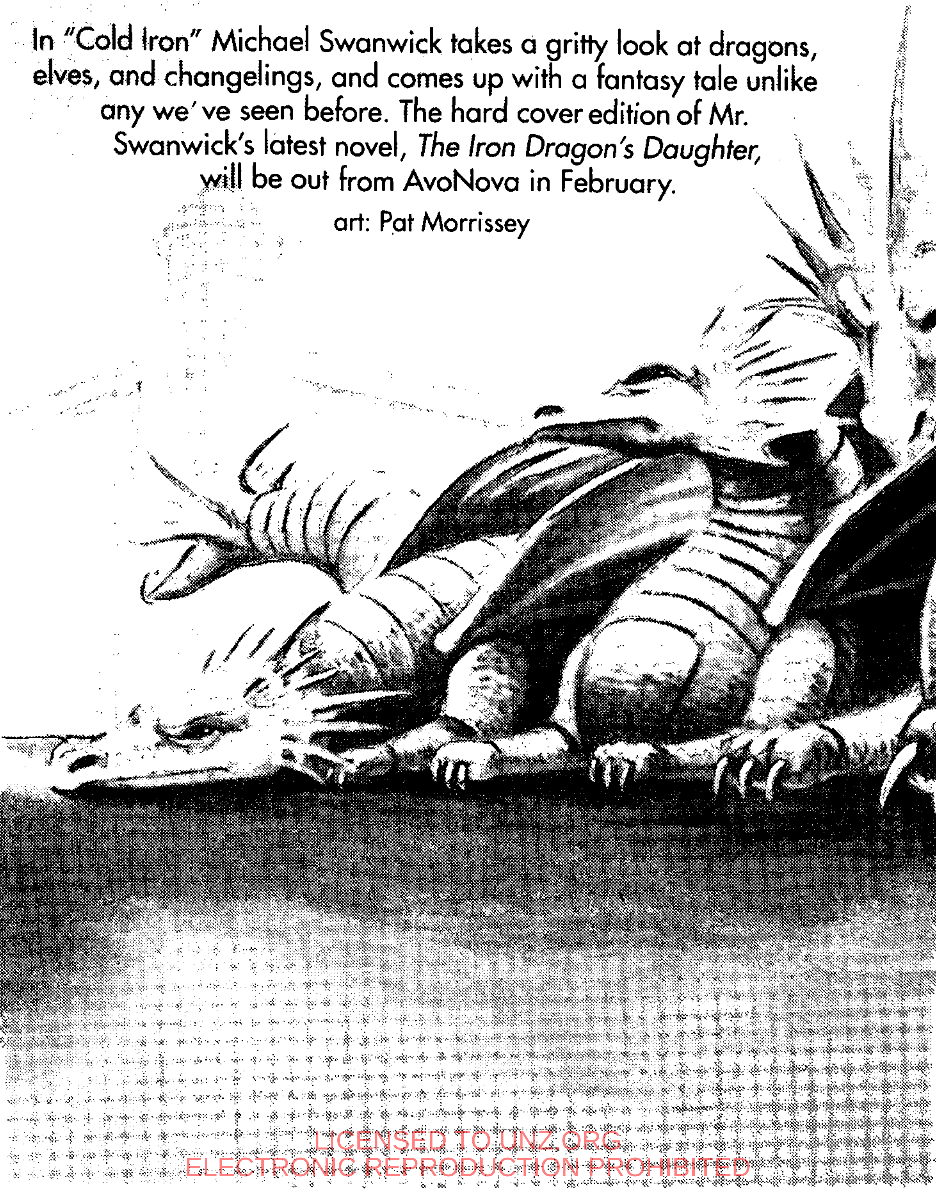
The feeling eventually passed. Teresa remarried, an older man, a man with few demands or expectations. They had a lovely home, gave many parties, and slept in separate beds. ●

COLD IRON

Michael Swanwick

In "Cold Iron" Michael Swanwick takes a gritty look at dragons, elves, and changelings, and comes up with a fantasy tale unlike any we've seen before. The hard cover edition of Mr. Swanwick's latest novel, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter,* will be out from AvoNova in February.

art: Pat Morrissey



1.

The changeling's decision to steal a dragon and escape was born, though she did not know it then, the night the children met to plot the death of their supervisor.

She had lived in the steam dragon plant for as long as she could remember. Each dawn she was marched with the other indentured minors from their dormitory in Building 5 to the cafeteria for a breakfast she barely had time to choke down before work. Usually she was then sent to the cylinder machine shop for polishing labor, but other times she was assigned to Building 12, where the black iron bodies were inspected and oiled before being sent to the erection shop for final assembly. The abdominal tunnels were too small for an adult. It was her duty to crawl within them to swab out and then grease those dark passages. She worked until sunset and sometimes later if there was a particularly important dragon under contract.

Her name was Jane.

The worst assignments were in the foundries, which were hellish in summer even before the molds were poured and waves of heat slammed from the cupolas like a fist, and miserable in winter, when snow blew through the broken windows and a grey slush covered the workfloor. The knockers and hogmen who labored there were swart, hairy creatures who never spoke, blackened and muscular things with evil red eyes and intelligences charred down to their irreducible cinders by decades-long exposure to magickal fires and cold iron. Jane feared them even more than she feared the molten metals they poured and the brute machines they operated.

She'd returned from the orange foundry one twilit evening too sick to eat, wrapped her thin blanket tight about her and fallen immediately asleep. Her dreams were all in a jumble. In them she was polishing, polishing, while walls slammed down and floors shot up like the pistons of a gigantic engine. She fled from them under her dormitory bed, crawling into the secret place behind the wallboards where she had, when younger, hidden from Rooster's petty cruelties. But at the thought of him, Rooster was there, laughing meanly and waving a three-legged toad in her face. He chased her through underground caverns, among the stars, through boiler rooms and machine shops.

The images stabilized. She was running and skipping through a world of green lawns and enormous spaces, a strangely familiar place she knew must be Home. This was a dream she had often. In it, there were people who cared for her and gave her all the food she wanted. Her clothes were clean and new, and nobody expected her to put in twelve hours daily at the workbench. She owned toys.

But then, as it always did, the dream darkened. She was skipping rope at the center of a vast expanse of grass when some inner sense alerted her to an intrusive presence. Bland white houses surrounded her, and yet the conviction that some malevolent intelligence was studying her increased. There were evil forces hiding beneath the sod, clustered behind every tree, crouching under the rocks. She let the rope fall to her feet, looked about wonderingly, and cried a name she could not remember.

The sky ripped apart.

"Wake up, you slattern!" Rooster hissed urgently. "We coven tonight. We've got to decide what to do about Stilt."

Jane jolted awake, heart racing. In the confusion of first waking, she felt glad to have escaped her dream, and sorry to have lost it. Rooster's eyes were two cold gleams of moonlight afloat in the night. He knelt on her bed, bony knees pressing against her. His breath smelled of elm bark and leaf mold intermingled. "Would you mind moving? You're poking into my ribs."

Rooster grinned and pinched her arm.

She shoved him away. Still, she was glad to see him. They'd established a prickly sort of friendship, and Jane had come to understand that beneath the swagger and thoughtlessness, Rooster was actually quite nice. "What do we have to decide about Stilt?"

"That's what we're going to talk about, stupid!"

"I'm tired," Jane grumbled. "I put in a long day, and I'm in no mood for your hijinks. If you won't tell me, I'm going back to sleep."

His face whitened and he balled his fist. "What is this—mutiny? I'm the leader here. You'll do what I say, when I say, because I say it. Got that?"

Jane and Rooster matched stares for an instant. He was a mongrel fey, the sort of creature who a century ago would have lived wild in the woods, emerging occasionally to tip over a milkmaid's stool or loosen the stitching on bags of milled flour so they'd burst when flung over a shoulder. His kind were shallow, perhaps, but quick to malice and tough as rats. He worked as a scrap iron boy, and nobody doubted he would survive his indenture.

At last Jane ducked her head. It wasn't worth it to defy him.

When she looked up, he was gone to rouse the others. Clutching the blanket about her like a cloak, Jane followed. There was a quiet scuffling of feet and paws, and quick exhalations of breath as the children gathered in the center of the room.

Dimity produced a stolen candle stub and wedged it in the widest part of a crack between two warped floorboards. They all knelt about it in a circle. Rooster muttered a word beneath his breath and a spark leaped from his fingertip to the wick.

A flame danced atop the candle. It drew all eyes inward and cast leaping phantasms on the walls, like some two-dimensional *Walpurgisnacht*. Twenty-three lesser flames danced in their irises. That was all dozen of them, assuming that the shadow-boy lurked somewhere nearby, sliding away from most of the light and absorbing the rest so thoroughly that not a single photon escaped to betray his location.

In a solemn, self-important voice, Rooster said: "Blugg must die." He drew a gooly-doll from his jerkin. It was a misshapen little thing, clumsily sewn, with two large buttons for eyes and a straight gash of charcoal for a mouth. But there was the stench of power to it, and at its sight several of the younger children closed their eyes in sympathetic hatred. "Skizzlecraw has the crone's-blood. She made this." Beside him, Skizzlecraw nodded unhappily. The gooly-doll had been her closely guarded treasure, and the Lady only knew how Rooster had talked her out of it. He brandished it over the candle. "We've said the prayers and spilt the blood. All we need do now is sew some touch of Blugg inside the stomach and throw it onto a furnace."

"That's murder!" Jane said, shocked.

Thistle snickered.

"I mean it! And not only is it wrong, but it's a stupid idea as well." Thistle was a shifter, as was Stilt himself, and like all shifters she was something of a lack-wit. Jane had learned long ago that the only way to silence Thistle was to challenge her directly. "What good would it do? Even if it worked—which I doubt—there'd be an investigation afterwards. And if by some miracle we weren't discovered, they'd still only replace Blugg with somebody every bit as bad. So what's the point of killing him?"

That should have silenced them. But to Jane's surprise, a chorus of angry whispers rose up like cricket song.

"He works us too hard!"

"He *beats* me!"

"I hate that rotten Old Stinky!"

"Kill him," the shadow-boy said in a trembling voice from directly behind her left shoulder. "Kill the big dumb fuck!" She whirled about and he wasn't there.

"Be still!" Casting a scornful look at Jane, Rooster said, "We have to kill Blugg. There is no alternative. Come forward, Stilt."

Stilt scootched a little closer. His legs were so long that when he sat down his knees were higher than his head. He slipped a foot out of his buskin and unself-consciously scratched himself behind an ear.

"Bend your neck."

The scrawny young shifter obeyed. Rooster shoved the head further down with one hand, and with the other pushed aside the lank, ditchwater hair. "Look—pinfeathers!" He yanked up Stilt's head again, and waggled the sharp, foot-long nose to show how it had calcified. "And his toes are turning to talons—see for yourselves."

The children pushed and shoved at one another in their anxiety to see. Stilt blinked, but suffered their pokes and prods with dim stoicism. Finally, Dimity sniffed and said, "So what?"

"He's coming of age, that's so what. Look at his nose! His eyes! Before the next Maiden's Moon, the change will be upon him. And then, and then. . . ." Rooster paused dramatically.

"Then?" the shadow-boy prompted in a papery, night-breeze of a voice. He was somewhere behind Thistle now.

"Then he'll be able to fly!" Rooster said triumphantly. "He'll be able to fly over the walls to freedom, and never come back."

Freedom! Jane thought. She rocked back on her heels, and imagined Stilt flapping off clumsily into a bronze-green autumn sky. Her thoughts soared with him, over the walls and razor-wire and into the air, the factory buildings and marshalling yards dwindling below, as he flew higher than the billowing exhaust from the smokestacks, into the deepening sky, higher than Dame Moon herself. And never, oh never, to return!

It was impossible, of course. Only the dragons and their half-human engineers ever left the plant by air. All others, workers and management alike, were held in by the walls and, at the gates, by security guards and the hulking cast iron Time Clock. And yet at that instant she felt something take hold within her, a kind of impossible hunger. She knew now that the idea, if nothing more, of freedom was possible, and, that established, the desire to be free herself was impossible to deny.

Down at the base of her hindbrain, something stirred and looked about with dark interest. She experienced a moment's dizzy nausea, a removal into some lightless claustrophobic realm, and then she was once again deep in the maw of the steam dragon plant, in the little dormitory room on the second floor of Building 5, wedged between a pattern store room and the sand shed, with dusty wooden beams and a tarpaper roof between her and the sky.

"So he'll get to fly away," Dimity said sourly. Her tail lashed back and forth discontentedly. "So what? Are we supposed to kill Blugg as a going-away present?"

Rooster punched her on the shoulder for insubordination. "Dolt! Pimple! Douchebag! You think Blugg hasn't noticed? You think he isn't planning to make an offering to the Goddess, so she'll keep the change away?"

Nobody else said anything, so reluctantly Jane asked, "What kind of offering?"

He grabbed his crotch with one hand, formed a sickle with the other, and then made a slicing gesture with the sickle. His hand fell away. He raised an eyebrow. "Get it?"

She didn't really, but Jane knew better than to admit that. Blushing, she said, "Oh."

"Okay, now, I've been studying Blugg. On black foundry days, he goes to his office at noon, where he can watch us through the window in his door, and cuts his big, ugly nails. He uses this humongous great knife, and cuts them down into an ashtray. When he's done, he balls them up in a paper napkin and tosses it into the foundry fires, so they can't be used against him.

"Next time, though, I'm going to create a disturbance. Then Jane will slip into his office and steal one or two parings. No more," he said, looking sternly at her, "or he'll notice."

"Me?" Jane squeaked. "Why me?"

"Don't be thick. He's got his door protected from the likes of the rest of us. But you—you're of the other blood. His wards and hexes won't stop *you.*"

"Well, thanks heaps," Jane said. "But I won't do it. It's wrong, and I've already told you why." Some of the smaller children moved toward her threateningly. She folded her arms. "I don't care what you guys say or do, you can't make me. Find somebody else to do your dirty work!"

"Aw, c'mon. Think of how grateful we'd all be." Rooster got up on one knee, laid a hand across his heart and reached out yearningly. He waggled his eyebrows comically. "I'll be your swain forever."

"No!"

Stilt was having trouble following what they were saying. In his kind this was an early sign of impending maturity. Brow furrowed, he turned to Rooster and haltingly said, "I . . . can't fly?"

Rooster turned his head to the side and spat on the floor in disgust. "Not unless Jane changes her mind."

Stilt began to cry.

His sobs began almost silently, but quickly grew louder. He threw back his head, and howled in misery. Horrified, the children tumbled over one another to reach him and stifle his cries with their hands and bodies. His tears muffled, then ceased.

For a long, breathless moment they waited to hear if Blugg had been roused. They listened for his heavy tread coming up the stairs, the angry creaking of old wood, felt for the stale aura of violence and barely suppressed anger that he pushed before him. Even Rooster look frightened.

But there came no sound other than the snort of cyborg hounds on patrol, the clang and rustle of dragons in the yards stirring restlessly in their chains, and the distant subaudible chime of midnight bells celebrating some faraway sylvan revelry. Blugg still slept.

They relaxed.

What a shivering, starveling batch they were! Jane felt a pity for them all that did not exclude herself. A kind of strength hardly distinguishable from desperation entered her then and filled her with resolve, as though she were nothing more than an empty mold whose limbs and torso had been suddenly poured through with molten iron. She burned with purpose. In that instant she realized that if she were ever to be free, she must be tough and ruthless. Her childish weaknesses would have to be left behind. Inwardly she swore, on her very soul, that she would do whatever it took, anything, however frightening, however vile, however wrong.

"All right," she said. "I'll do it."

"Good." Without so much as a nod of thanks, Rooster began elaborating his plot, assigning every child a part to play. When he was done, he muttered a word and made a short, chopping pass with his hand over the candle. The flame guttered out.

Any one of them could've extinguished it with the slightest puff of breath. But that wouldn't have been as satisfying.

* * *

The black foundry was the second largest workspace in all the plant. Here the iron was poured to make the invulnerable bodies and lesser magick-proofed parts of the great dragons. Concrete pits held the green sand, silt mixes and loam molds. Cranes moved slowly on overhead beams, and the October sunlight slanted down through airborn dust laboriously churned by gigantic ventilating fans.

At noon an old lake hag came by with the lunch cart, and Jane received a plastic-wrapped sandwich and a cup of lukewarm grapefruit juice for her portion. She left her chamois gloves at the workbench, and carried her food to a warm, dusty niche beside a wood frame bin filled with iron scrap, a jumble of claws, scales and cogwheels.

Jane set the paper cup by her side, and smoothed her coarse brown skirt comfortably over her knees. Closing her eyes, she pretended she was in a high-elven cloud palace. The lords and ladies sat about a long table, all marble and white lace, presided over by slim tapers in silver sticks. The ladies had names like Fata Elspeth and Fata Morgaine, and spoke in mellifluous polysyllables. Their laughter was like little bells and they called her Fata Jayne. An elven prince urged a bowl of sorbet dainties on her. There was romance in his eyes. Dwarven slaves heaped the floor with cut flowers in place of rushes.

She took a bite of sandwich, and chewed it slowly to make it last.

Crouched in the arch of the window was her very own aquilohippus, jeweled saddle on its back, and anxious to fly. Its glance was fierce and its beak as sharp as razors. Nobody but she dared ride it, but to her it was very gentle and sweet. Its name was—

Somebody stomped on her foot.

"Oh!" Jane scrambled to her feet, knocking over her juice, and saw that Rooster had just passed her, a bag of scrap slung over his shoulder—he was on the second lunch shift, and still working. "Heads up, dipshit! It's almost time!" he growled from the corner of his mouth. Then, to take the sting off his words, he smiled and winked. But it was a wan and unconvincing smile. If she hadn't known better, she'd've thought him afraid.

Then he was gone.

Her peaceful mood was shattered. Briefly, she had forgotten Rooster's wild plan. Now it came back to her, and with it the certainty that it would never work. She would be caught and punished, and there was nothing she could do about it. She had given her word.

The wall of the foundry furthest from the cupolas held a run of narrow offices for shop-level supervisors. Jane shoved her sandwich into the pocket of her work apron, and peered around the edge of the bin. She could see Blugg's office and within it Blugg seated at his desk, cigar in mouth, slowly leafing through a glossy magazine.

Blugg was fat and burly, with heavy jowls and a low brow. He had wispy flyaway hair, which was thinning and which he never tended, and a curling pair of ram's horns of which he was inordinately vain. For special occasions he had them lacquered and varnished, and once a year on Samhain, he would gild the tips. Traces of gold remained in the whorls and ridges for weeks after.

"Hsst!"

Jane turned. The shadow-boy was standing in the niche she had just vacated, a ragged figure dim and difficult to see even at high noon. "Rooster sent me," he said. "I'm supposed to keep lookout for you." She could not make out the expression on his face, but his voice trembled.

She felt awful now, and afraid. "I can't," she said. She didn't have the nerve to go ahead with it. "I just—"

A roar shattered the midday calm. Suddenly everyone was running, throwing down tools, scuttling out onto the workfloor and climbing up on the molds to see what was going on. They were all rushing toward the cupolas. Something was happening there. Jane stared into the swirl of figures, unable to make sense of all the noise and motion. Then suddenly everything snapped into place.

Rooster, laughing insanely, was pissing on a hammer giant's foot.

The hammer giant screamed in fury. It was the Sand Slinger himself, the biggest creature in all the plant, that Rooster had decided to pick on. This was typical Rooster shrewdness, since the Sand Slinger was not only the largest but had the slowest reaction time of all the giants. But it was still a madly dangerous thing to do.

Now at last the Sand Slinger thought to raise its foot up from the stream of urine and bring it down upon its miniscule antagonist. The floor shook with the impact.

Rooster darted aside, jeering.

The giant moved its head from side to side in baffled rage. Brow knitted, it stared down at the three-ton maul lying atop its anvil. A cunning expression blossomed on its coarse face, and it reached an enormous hand for the hammer.

"Now!" The shadow-boy anxiously pointed to Blugg's office. It was empty. The door had been left slammed wide, open and unguarded.

Crash. The hammer slammed down where Rooster had been.

Running, stooping, Jane scuttled across those enormous empty spaces separating her from Blugg's office. She was aghast at her own daring, and terrified she would be caught. Behind her, the hammer slammed down again. The soles of her feet tingled with the vibrations. Then she was in the office. She stepped immediately to the side, where the wall would hide her, and straightened up to get her bearings.

Crash. The hammer fell a third time. People were yelling, running, screaming.

The office was close and cluttered. Technical manuals lay on the floor in heaps. The trash basket overflowed with litter. Water-stained plans for wyverns obsolete decades ago hung on the walls, along with thumbtacked production schedules gone brown at the edges, and a SAFETY FIRST poster showing a cartoon hand holding index finger upward, a ribbon tied in a bow just beneath the second knuckle.

The sole bit of color came from a supplier's calendar with a picture of naked mermaids, fat as sea cows, lolling on the rocks. Jane stared at those pink acres of marshmallow-soft flesh for a frozen instant, as if the image were a window into an alien and threatening universe. Then she shook her head clear and darted to the desk.

The pressed metal ashtray was exactly where it ought to be. A cigar smoldered on its lip, still damp on one end. Gingerly, she took the smelly thing between thumb and forefinger and held it aside. Hurry! she thought. In among the ashes were what looked to be seven crescent moons carved from yellowed ivory. She picked out two, put down the cigar, and whirled to go.

But then a speck of green caught her eye, and she glanced down in the waste basket. One corner of a book peeked out from the trash. For no reason that she could think of, she brushed the papers aside to see what it was. Then she saw and caught her breath.

A grimoire!

It was a thick volume in a pebbled green vinyl cover, with the company logo on the front and beneath that a title she could not read in raised gold-edged lettering. Three chrome bolts held in the pages so they could be easily removed and updated. Jane gaped, then came to her senses. Grimoires were valuable beyond imagining, so rare that each was numbered and registered in the front offices. It was impossible that one should end up here, in Blugg's office, much less that it would then be thrown away as worthless.

Still . . it wouldn't hurt just to touch it.

She touched it, and a numinous sense of *essence* flowed up her arm. In a way unlike anything she had ever felt before the volume spoke to her. It was real! Beyond any doubt or possibility of delusion, the book was a true grimoire. Here, within her grasp, was real magick; recipes for hellfire and vengeance, secrets capable of leveling cities, the technologies of invisibility and ecstatic cruelty, power enough to raise the dead and harrow Hell itself.

For a long, timeless instant she communed with the grimoire, letting it suffuse and possess her. At last its whispered promises faded and were still.

She dug it out of the papers.

It was too big to carry in one hand. Jane stuck the stolen nail parings in her mouth, where she could hold them between lip and gum, and seized the book with both hands.

At that instant there was a long, shrill whistle. She turned, and there in the doorway stood the shadow-boy, held back by the fetish-bundles nailed to the jamb, urging her out with anxious sweeps of his arm. Beyond, she saw that the Sand Slinger had been brought under control. Rooster was held captive by one of the hogmen. The spectators were breaking up, some into small knots to discuss what they'd seen, others turning away, returning to their jobs.

Cradling the book in her arms, she ran from the room. It weighed a ton, and she staggered under its weight. But she wasn't going to give it up. It was hers now.

The shadow-boy stood in open daylight, as close to visible as he ever came. "What took you so long?" he whispered fearfully. "He'll be coming soon."

"Here." She thrust the book at him. "Take this back to the dormitory, quick, and hide it under my blanket." When he didn't move, she snapped, "There's no time for questions. Just do it!"

In a voice close to tears, the shadow-boy said, "But what about my lunch?" His head turned yearningly to where the lake hag leaned over her cart, staring slack-jawed at the aftermath of Rooster's fight. She had yet to begin her second swing through the factory.

"You can have mine," Jane dredged her somewhat flattened sandwich from her apron pocket, and slapped it down atop the grimoire. "Now go!"

An indistinct motion that might have been a shrug, and the shadow-boy was gone. Jane did not see him leave. It was as if he had simply dissolved into the gloom and ceased to be.

She raised a hand to her mouth to spit out the stolen nail parings, and simultaneously saw Blugg all the way across the foundry, squinting straight at her. Jane stood in an exquisite paralysis of exposure.

Then Rooster darted free of the hogman and shouted something up at the giant. With a roar of outrage, the Sand Slinger seized the first weapon that came to hand, and *hurled* it.

Lightning flashed.

The afterimage of the molten iron that splayed from the flung ladle burned across Jane's eyes. Voices rose in a babble of fear, laced through with urgently shouted orders. High above them all, Rooster screamed an agonized scream.

In the confusion, Jane made good her escape. She was back at her bench in a minute, hastily pulling on her gloves. Maybe Blugg hadn't really seen her. Maybe he'd forgotten her in all the excitement.

"Did you get them?" Smidgeon whispered. For a second Jane couldn't imagine what she was talking about. Then she remembered, nodded, and spat out the stolen nail parings into her hand. Smidgeon took them and passed them down the line to Lumpbockle who palmed them off to Little Dick, and from there Jane lost track. She scooped some emery powder into the palm of her glove. Back to work. That was the safest course.

To the far side of the factory, Rooster's still body was being carted away. Leather-helmeted spriggans ran about, dousing small fires the molten metal had started. Water sizzled and gushed into steam. A scorched smell filled the air.

Over it all rumbled the Sand Slinger's laughter, like thunder.

Blugg descended upon the workbench, face black with rage. He slammed his hand on the table so hard the emery trays jumped. "Stand up, damn you!" he shouted. "Stand when I'm talking to you!"

They scrambled to their feet.

"You vile little pieces of shit. You worthless, miserable . . . " He didn't seem able to compose his thoughts. "Who put Rooster up to this? That's what I want to know. Who? Eh?" He seized Smidgeon in one enormous hand and hauled the wretched creature struggling off her feet. "Tell me!" He twisted her ear until she whimpered.

"I-I think he did it himself, sir. He's always been a wild one."

"Bah!" Blugg contemptuously flung Smidgeon down, and turned on Jane. His face swelled up before her, as large and awful as the moon. Jane could smell his sweat, not the fine, clean astringency of a Rooster or a shadow-boy, but the strong, sour smell of an adult male. She smelled his breath, too, sweet with corruption. He had yellow little stumps of teeth, black where the gums drew away from them. A bit of rotten meat caught between two of his teeth mesmerized Jane. She could not look away.

"You—" he began. Then, shaking his head bullishly, he drew back and addressed them all: "You think you can ruin my career, don't you?"

They were too fearful to speak.

"Well, I have news for you! I'm not some dickless wonder you can fuck over anytime you feel like. You make things hard on me, and I'll make things hard on you. I'll make things harder on you than you could ever imagine!"

He bent over, turning sideways, and pointed to his own rump. "When you make trouble, Management is going to land on me right *here,* get that? And if they land on me *here,* I'm going to land on you *here* too." Every time he said *here,* he waggled his backside and jabbed his forefinger at it; it would have been funny, if it weren't so frightening. "Do you read me?"

They stood trembling and silent before him.

"I said: Do you read me!"

"Yes, sir!"

For a long time Blugg glared at them, motionless, silent, unblinking. A muscle in the back of Jane's left leg began to tremble with the effort of standing still. She was sure he was going to ask what she was doing in his office. Despair welled up within her, a force so overwhelming that once it started to leak from her eyes she knew it would fill the room and drown them all.

"You . . . little . . . vermin," he said at last. "There's nothing I'd like better than to strangle each and every one of you with my bare hands. I could do it, too—don't think you'd be missed! You eat like pigs and then spend half the day sitting on your thumbs." He walked down the line looking them each in the eye. When he came to Jane she again thought he would ask why she had invaded his office, but he did not.

"All right," he said at last, "line up by height, and out the east door doubleti—where's the shadow-boy?"

"Here, sir," the shadow-boy said meekly. Jane started. She hadn't realized he was standing beside her.

Blugg rocked slowly on his heels, sweeping his gaze up and down the workbench, savoring their fear. Then he snapped, "All right, doubletime out—I've got some special work duty for you little shits. Now!"

They were quick-marched, Blugg cursing them every step of the way, out the east door, past the loading docks and around the steam hammer works. A brace of loaders were parked in front of the orange smithy, so they took a detour through the old file works building, which had begun long ago as a covered yardway connecting the planing shed to the machine shop and then been expanded and still later, after the new file works building was dedicated, renovated into a clutch of utility rooms.

Blugg had still not said anything of Jane's being in his office. She was beginning to dare hope that all that had happened had driven it from his mind.

"You!" He grabbed Jane by her collar, half-choking her, and kicked open a door. "Wait in here. If you're not here when I return, you know what'll happen to you."

He flung her inside and slammed the door.

The hurrying footsteps of the children faded away, and all was still.

2.

The room was empty. One wall was all windows from waist-high to the ceiling, panes painted over in a motley, unplanned pattern of grey and dull blue to reduce environmental distraction and promote worker efficiency. Pale light shone through them, wintry weak and shadowless. Thin cracks where the paint had contracted by the edges of the sash bars shone painfully bright.

Beneath the windows a long lab bench was cluttered with testing equipment. Three oscilloscopes shivered liquidly, square-cornered sine waves slowly creeping across their screens. White smocks had been hastily hung over wall pegs or left draped atop high wooden stools, as if the low-level technomancers who ordinarily worked here had been suddenly driven away by some industrial disaster. To the far side of the room, a new-model dragon's eyeball, as tall as she was, peered from a testing box. *Click*. It swiveled to look at her.

Jane shivered miserably. She tried to picture what punishment Blugg would inflict on her for her crime, and could not. Whatever it was, it would be bad. She walked slowly across the room and back again, the sound of her footsteps bouncing from the high ceiling. The dragon's eye tracked her progress.

Was Rooster dead? His plan had turned out even worse than she had anticipated. She had expected that he would escape unscathed while she herself would be caught and subjected to a punishment both swift and dreadful. This was worse, far worse, on both counts.

Time passed, and Blugg did not return. Nor did the techs who surely worked here. At first she awaited them with fear, knowing they would not accept her explanation of what she was doing in their workspace.

Then, from sheer boredom, she began to look forward to the confrontation. Later, she despaired of it. Finally, she arrived at indifference. Let them come or not; she did not care. She was a creature of pure perception, a passive observer of the coarse feel of the metallic grit dusting the workbench, of the oxidized rubber smell of the voltmeters, and the fine sheen of the smoothly worn grain on the seats of the stools. Without her, these things would cease to exist, fading silently and gratefully into nothingness.

By excruciatingly slow degrees the window dimmed and the room cooled. Just before darkness, someone walked by in the hallway, flicking switches. Row upon row of fluorescent tubes winked on overhead.

Jane's stomach ached. She felt miserable in a way that was beyond tears. Her insides cramped. For the umpteenth time she walked into the center of the room, the dragon's eye following her every step. She had no idea what time it was, but she was certain she had missed supper.

The door slammed open.

Blugg entered, looking weary and distracted. His grey workshirt was damp under the armpits, and the sleeves were rolled halfway up his wooly forearms. The dragon's eye flicked toward him.

"What were you doing in my office?" Oddly, Blugg did not look at Jane. Instead, he frowned down at a small filigree-capped crystal that hung from his hand on a loop of thread.

"I was only. . . ."

All of its own volition, Jane's hand rose to her mouth. Her lips pursed involuntarily. It was the exact same gesture she had been making when Blugg saw her in front of his office. Horrified, she whipped her hand down and hid it behind her back.

Blugg stared at her in a bug-eyed, unblinking way for a moment. A slow smile grew on his face. "You little minx. You were going through my trash."

"No!" she cried. "I didn't take anything, really I didn't."

Blugg slid the crystal back in its plastic case and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. He reached forward and seized her chin.

His smile grew dreamier, and more frighteningly distant. He turned her head from side to side, studying her face. "Mmmmm." He ran his gaze down the front of her work apron, as though appraising her strength. His nostrils flared. "Rummaging through my trash basket, were you? Looking for orange peels and bits of sandwich crust. Well, why not? A healthy appetite is a good thing in a youngster."

This was more terrifying than threats would have been, for it made no sense at all. Jane stared up at Blugg uncomprehendingly.

He laid his hands on her shoulders, turned her around slowly. "You've been working for me how long? Why, it's been years, hasn't it? How time has flown. You're getting to be a big little girl, aren't you? Perhaps it's time you were promoted. I'm going to put in for a Clerk-Messenger Three. How would you like that?"

"Sir?"

"Don't sir me! It's a simple enough question." He looked at her oddly, then sniffed the air again. "Pfaugh! You're bleeding. Why haven't you kept yourself clean?"

"Bleeding?" she said blankly.

Blugg pointed down at her leg with a fat, blunt finger. "There."

Jane looked down. There was *blood* trickling down her calf. She could feel it now, itching all the way down from her thigh.

This final indignity broke her delicately maintained control. The sudden, sorcerous appearance of blood from some previously unsuspected wound ruptured the membrane holding back all her fear and apprehension. She began to cry.

"Oh, shit." Blugg made a face. "Why does all this crap always happen to me?" Disgusted, he waved her to the door. "Go on! Go straight to the nurse's station and do whatever she tells you."

"Congratulations," the nurse said. "You're a woman now."

The nurse was a sour old creature with piggy eyes, a pointed nose, and two donkey's ears. She showed Jane how to fold a sanitary napkin, and what to do with it. Then she delivered a memorized lecture on personal hygiene, gave her two aspirins and sent her back to the dormitory.

Rooster was there already. He lay delirious upon his bed, head swathed in bandages. "He's going to lose his left eye," Dimity said. "That's *if* he lives. They said if he doesn't die tonight, he'll probably be okay."

Jane timidly touched Rooster's shoulder, though she could scarcely bear doing so. His skin was pale as wax, and cold. "Fly the friendly skies," he mumbled, lost in some faraway delirium. "Join the Pepsi generation."

Jane snatched her hand away from him, as if scorched.

"I'm taking care of him. So don't you interfere." Dimity smoothed the blanket down fussily. There was a defiant edge to her voice. When she was done, she leaned back, hands on hips, waiting for Jane to challenge her. Then, when Jane did not, she smiled meanly. "Time for you to go to bed. Isn't it?"

Jane nodded and went to her corner.

The grimoire was waiting for her. The shadow-boy had left it under her folded blanket as instructed. She undressed slowly, managing to spread out the blanket and slip beneath without exposing the book. When she put her arms around it, she experienced a tingling sensation, like a low-voltage electrical current running through her. It made her feel strange.

That night, it seemed to take forever for the children to fall asleep. Rooster groaned and cried and babbled in his sleep, and his pain terrified them. Some of the smaller creatures crept from their own cots to huddle with their friends. Even the oldest among them occasionally sighed or turned over on their sides to face away from his suffering.

At long last, though, only Jane remained awake.

Silently, she slipped from her covers and under the bed. She pried up the broken board and squeezed into the narrow space between the dormitory room and the sand shed wall. It was dark there and dusty, but not close, for neither wall reached quite to the ceiling. A tiny draft found her and, naked, she shivered. It was not quite cold enough, though, to force her back for her dress. She groped blindly behind her for the grimoire, and pulled it in after her.

Rooster groaned. In a high, lucid voice he said, "Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese . . . " Jane found herself unable to breathe. ". . . and a sesame seed bun." It was too awful, his lonely voice speaking to no one in the emptiness of the night. "Teflon." She grasped the broken board with her hand and swung it to. With it closed, she could no longer hear him.

Settling herself down on her heels, she placed the grimoire on her lap and opened it. The pages were black and lightless, but the letters shone coolly, silvery to the eye and slick to the touch. She found that when she concentrated hard on them, a whispery sense of meaning filled her, though she could not quite capture the significance of each word. This was a table of compression ratios, and here was a section on machining tolerances for the cylinders. She lingered briefly over the calibration settings for the crystals, then flipped ahead, trusting to her fingertips to convey to her the essence of what they skimmed, skipping and leaping ahead until she came to what she wanted.

It was the chapter that told how to actually operate a dragon.

Until that instant, she had not known what she intended. Now, though, running her hands over and over the schematics with their cryptic symbols for capacitors and potentiometers and resistors and grounds, dipping her head so she could caress the printed dials and circuits with her cheek, breathing deep the ink and coated-paper smell that emanated from each page, it seemed to her that she had been born intending to someday steal a dragon.

The space between walls was so tight it pinched her shoulders. She did not notice. Her head was full of fast black dragons. What had been invisible to her, because ubiquitous, now stood revealed. She heard them scream supersonic across the sky, fueled by wrath and gasoline. She felt the gravitational pull of them, the superheated backwash of their passing. And she saw herself riding one away, away, away.

First, though, she would have to master the grimoire. She would have to learn how the dragons were operated.

For hours Jane pored over the book, gently touching and internalizing the chapter sigil by sigil. She finished her first reading of it in time for breakfast. She crawled out of the wall just as the wake-up whistle blew, and was marched off to eat, yawning, bone-weary and happy.

The next night, for the first time, she heard the dragon speak to her.

Three days later Jane, Dimity, and Thistle were taken to the machine shop. The regular workspaces were all claimed, and after some argument with the shop supervisor Blugg took a box of machine wheels under his arm and led them upstairs. A balcony-level string of rooms ran completely around the building there. It was junk space, but Blugg found a place for them between a wooden stairway and the brick chimney-top of an industrial alembic. They were given a rickety wood bench at a window ledge, and told to wipe the wheels clean of grease.

Then Blugg left.

The window had long ago been painted over, glass and all, with white or green or grey paint—it was hard to guess which now—and there was a gap of at least a foot between the upper sash and the top of the frame, glued permanently open. Chill air poured down on them. A brown enameled kerosene heater wedged under the stairway strained to offset the cold.

"Trade places with me," Dimity said, as soon as Blugg was gone. "Thistle and I want to be closer to the heater."

Jane almost refused. But Dimity was always complaining about the cold; it was possible she felt it more. And Thistle was smiling in rather a mean way. It was probably best to give in to them on this one.

She stood, walked to the far side of the bench, and sat down again without saying a word.

The cogwheels were the size of silver pennies but much thinner, with fine teeth that prickled when touched edge-on. The grease on them was an almost translucent brown, and had hardened so that it did not come off easily. They worked industriously, knowing that Blugg would pop up to look in on them regularly.

But the inspections never came. Hours passed. Blugg seemed to have forgotten them completely.

Jane stared sightlessly ahead as she worked, her thoughts on the grimoire and on the dragon's voice she was still not entirely sure that she heard speaking to her at night. She dreamed of gleaming ebon flanks and smooth, streamlined surfaces, of strength and endurance wedded to ruthless speed. She imagined her hand on the throttle, with all that fearsome power under her control.

Beside her, Dimity sighed.

The silvery-dull sunlight streaming in over the top of the window was suddenly divided by the fluttering shadow of wings. Dimity looked up and eagerly cried, "Toad eggs!"

"Toad eggs?" Thistle said dimly. "Eww. Whatever are you talking about?"

"Up there, under the roof. That's where they've built their nests." Dimity climbed up on the ledge and stood on tiptoe. She stretched an arm out the window as far as it would go, her tail twitching impatiently. There were several muddy blobs on the undersides of the eaves. "Damn! I can't quite. . . ."

"There won't be any eggs," Jane pointed out. "Nothing lays eggs in the autumn."

"Toads do. It's not like the spring clutch, it doesn't hatch. They store them away for the winter, so they'll have something to eat during the

Axe Moon." She looked down, a strange smile twisting her wide mouth. "Jaaane! Climb out there, and fetch me in some eggs."

"I'm no climber! Why don't you get Smidgeon or Little Dick or. . . ."

"They're not here." She exchanged glances with Thistle, and before Jane could react, the shifter had seized her and thrust her up alongside Dimity. The young feys were both preternaturally strong. Laughing, they stuck her out the window and shoved. The box of cogwheels was kicked over, and little metal wheels went spinning and rolling away. "Out you go, my lovely!" Dimity sang.

Jane clutched wildly at the frame. Cold wind blew in her face, forcing tears to her eyes. Across a cinder-paved courtyard, Building 6 reeled up at her, dark clouds scudding above. Below and to one side, she saw the tarpaper roof of a utility shack, dotted with bits of brick and old soda bottles. It was at least a thirty foot drop.

"Oh, holy Mother!" Jane gasped. Desperately, she struggled to pull herself back in.

But tough, merciless hands pried her fingers free. With a jar, she was pushed out into the void. Flailing, afraid she would throw up, she squeezed her eyes shut tight and grabbed for the window frame. Her weight rested atop the upper sash now. Only her legs were inside.

"Don't wriggle, you'll make us drop you."

She had hold of the frame again. Brittle flakes of paint crunched under her fingertips. She pulled herself flat against the building, brick scratching her cheek. The sweet, pungent smell of toad droppings filled her nostrils. The outside top of the frame was white with them. It was cold out here, too. She shivered convulsively. "Oh, please let me in," she babbled, "sweet Dimity, I'll do anything you ask me, I'll be your best friend, only—"

"Here." A hand shot out with a plastic bag in it. "Fill this up, and you can come back in again." One of Jane's shoes had fallen off and now she felt Thistle peel her sock back. A sharp fingertip drew itself up the center of her foot, paused, then waggled at the softest part of her flesh. "Stop that tickling! If she falls, I won't get any eggs." The hand moved impatiently up and down. "Take the bag."

Jane obeyed. She took a long, deep breath, and opened her eyes. Her head and stomach were so dizzy-sick that it took her a moment to realize that she was staring up at the underside of the eaves. There must be twenty nests up there, warty and bulging things with a hole to one side, like ill-made jars.

The toads had scattered when she first emerged from the window. They fluttered in agitation not far off, their black-feathered wings beating hysterically. They were loathsome things, the miscegenated get of jackdaws upon their lustful batrachian dams, and like their sires they were notorious thieves. Their nests were ordinarily kept cleared away from the roofs because they had a fondness for shiny objects and, unlike most wild things, had little or no fear of fire. They had been known to torch buildings by filching lit cigarettes and carrying them back to their nests. They were a terrible hazard.

Trembling, she stretched out a hand. The nest was just out of reach. Unhappily, she knew that Dimity would never accept that as an excuse. Taking a long, steadying breath, she forced herself to lean back over empty air. With the arm clutching the window fully extended she could easily reach the nearest nest. She squeezed her hand into the opening.

The inside of the nest was lined with fine black down, silkily soft to her touch. She probed to the back of the nest, and found a clutch of sticky warm eggs. She scooped them out and straightened at the waist, returning to the window. Awkwardly she opened the bag and dropped the eggs within. They slid to the bottom in a mass.

She hadn't gotten all the eggs. She leaned back again to scoop up those she had missed. This time, she only got a half-handful, along with two bits of aluminum foil, a shard of broken glass, and a chromed hex nut. These last she let drop to the distant ground.

Second nest. She dredged out the eggs quickly. Just as she was withdrawing her hand, the wind whipped up, sending a blast of icy air right through her clothing. She knew better than to look down, but the sudden swirl of air made her feel especially vertiginous. She wanted to cry, from fear and frustration, but dared not.

If she started crying now, she might never stop.

This nest had, in addition to the eggs, several more bits of foil and a jagged strip of copper sheeting gone green that made her think for a horrified instant that something had stung her, when she jabbed her hand against the point. "The bag is almost half-full!" she cried. "Can I come back in again?"

"Not enough."

"But I can't reach any more. Really I can't."

Dimity's face appeared in the window opening. Her grip on Jane's legs slipped a bit, and Jane cried out in fear. Dimity squinted judiciously. "That one there." She pointed. "You can reach it."

Jane's fingers ached. She was not sure her strength would hold out. The underside of the eaves crawled in her vision from her staring so hard, but when she closed her eyes all the world seemed to flip over, and she had to open them quickly or lose her balance.

She forced herself to stretch out as far as she could.

Her hand would not quite reach. "Dimity—" she began tremblingly.

"Eggs!"

There was only one way. Jane squirmed a little higher up on the window, so that her weight now rested halfway down her thighs. She stretched so far she could hear her bones creak.

Again her hand slipped into a nest. She felt the downy warmth and then the slippery stickiness within. She curved her hand and scooped out the eggs.

But the toads were beginning to regain their courage. They croaked and cawed at her, and made short, threatening swoops. One flew almost in her face, and when she threw up an elbow to protect herself, it bounced off her forearm with a solid, slimy thump. Jane's stomach lurched in revulsion.

"Hold my legs tight," she whispered, not at all sure she could be heard, but unable to speak any louder. She straightened at the waist.

Then she was back at the window. Gasping, she hugged it to her.

For a long time she was unable to move. When she had somewhat recovered herself, she tremblingly opened the bag and dropped in her final handful of eggs. Something red gleamed within. She stuck in two fingers to fish it out.

It was a ruby.

The ruby was half as long as her thumb, hexagonal in cross-section, and flat on both silvered ends, an industrial crystal used in occult information systems for the storage and processing of data. Smaller than a pencil stub, it was probably worth more than Jane herself was.

The problem was that she dared not bring it in with the eggs, or Dimity, her avarice excited, would send her out again to look for more. She'd return it to the nest if she dared, but her strength and nerve both were shot. If she dropped it and it were found later, Dimity would hear and figure out what had happened.

The top of the window ledge was white with droppings. She stuck the crystal in among them, and said, "Let me in. I've got your eggs."

Dimity snatched the bag from Jane's hand, even before she could climb wobblingly down from the ledge and collapse on the bench. "Good little Janie, *nice* little Janie-poo," she gloated, sliding her hand deep into the bag, and dumping a great gelatinous mass in Thistle's eagerly cupped palms. She placed an egg into her mouth and closed her eyes in ecstasy as it popped. She shoveled in more.

The cogwheels were all over the floor. Wearily, Jane righted the box and began picking them up. "Dimity," she said at last. "Why do you hate me?"

Dimity smiled an eggy smile. Thistle opened her mouth wide to show its inside yellow with yolk. Bits of shell clung to her lips. "Want some? After all, you fetched them."

Tears welled up in Jane's eyes. "I never did anything to you. Why are you like this to me?"

Thistle's cheeks were bulging with eggs. Dimity swallowed hers down, then turned the plastic bag inside out and began licking it. "I hear you're going to be Blugg's messenger," she said.

"Blugg's little pet is more like it," Thistle spat. "That's what you are, aren't you, Missy?"

"No, I'm not!"

"You know what he really wants, don't you?" Dimity thrust an arm up Thistle's skirt, and Thistle rolled her eyes in mock ecstasy. "He wants you to be his familiar."

Jane shook her head. "I don't know what that means."

"He wants to poke his wig-wag into your cunny."

"But that doesn't make any sense!" she wailed. "Why would he want—?"

Dimity's eyes turned the hard flat red of two garnets. "Don't act so innocent with *me!* I hear you creeping out of bed at night, crawling into the wall so you can stick your fingers up your rabbit-hole."

"No. Really."

"Oh! No, of course. You wouldn't do anything like thaa-at. Hotsy-totsy little Miss Changeling. Think we're so special, do we? Just you wait until Blugg sticks his thing in your heinie-hole, let's see you put on your airs then!"

Thistle began to skip and dance about Jane, lifting her skirts up above her waist and waggling her skinny little behind. "Heinie-hole, heinie-hole," she sang. "Heinie-heinie-heinie-hole."

"Just keep this in mind, girlie-girl." The fey grabbed her by the collar, bunched it together and lifted her painfully off the ground. "I give the orders here. What I say goes, messenger or not, familiar or not. You obey me. Got that?"

"Yes, Dimity," she said helplessly.

"He'll want to put it in your mouth too," Thistle smirked.

Rooster lay abed for a week before he lapsed long enough into consciousness to get caught up. When his resources were at ebb, he lay motionless, struggling to breathe, each gasp of air rough and anguished. Sometimes he cried. Other times, snatches of glossolalic nonsense floated out of him. "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains," he said. "Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco."

Every night Jane waited until the others were asleep and crept into the wall to commune with the grimoire. When she had read herself into a trance, half exhaustion and half rapture, the dragon's voice would speak from the back of her skull. It told her they were both prisoners. It said their destinies were linked, and spoke of the freedom that would be theirs when they two flew off together, describing endless mountain chains with cold, high lakes, southern archipelagoes twisting like lizards, and high aeries niched among the autumn stars. She stayed, listening, inside the wall for as long as possible, emerging only when she was in danger of nodding off and being discovered missing at roll call the next morning. She didn't know if her dragon's voice were real or fantasy, and she didn't care.

She was under a compulsion.

It was always startling, when she emerged, to find Rooster still in his bed, she'd have forgotten him so thoroughly. He seemed an alien thing, slick with sweat, shining like an insect caught midway through metamorphosis. The pus that stained the edges of his bandages was faintly luminescent, like corpsefire, and he emitted an odd odor.

Jane's guilt was overwhelming. She ought to tend to him, she knew, wipe away his sweat, change his bandages, do what she could to ease his pain. But he repulsed her, even more than the foreign demons who worked in Section A as woodcarvers and joiners did, who were rumored to be cannibals and coprophages. She could not bring herself to go near him.

One evening the children came tromping back to the dormitory to find Rooster awake and waiting for them. He had propped himself up weakly against the headboard. At the sight of them he twisted his mouth into what he must have thought looked like a grin. "Back so early? Now in my day, we had to put in a full day's work, we did. These young people today, I don't know."

The children clustered timidly by the door.

"Well, come on. There's no reason to stand back like that. It's me!"

They edged uncomfortably closer.

"Well. So how'd it go? Is Blugg dead?"

Nobody answered.

Now Rooster looked concerned. "Didn't the gooly-doll work?"

Dimity cleared her throat. "We haven't tried it yet," she admitted.

"You pussies." Rooster's face had the gently luminous quality of the flesh of some fey mushrooms from the deep woods. The bandages were all crusty, for they hadn't been changed in days. His eyelid sank almost closed, then opened again. "Why not?"

"Dimity said—" Stilt began.

"—that we should wait on you," Jane said hastily. Dimity favored her with a quick glance that said as clear as words: Don't think that will get you any favors. Her tail switched twice. "So we'd be certain to do it properly."

"That's all right, then." Rooster was not a subtle creature and had caught none of the undercurrents of the exchange. "That's not half so bad as I'd expected." He nodded to Stilt. "You hear that? We look after your interests, old buddy."

Stilt nodded and bobbed his head, eagerly, grotesquely happy, perfectly secure in his friend's ability to protect him. In the face of such faith, Jane had no choice but to admit to herself that she no longer believed in Rooster's plan. They were only children. Their simple magicks wouldn't touch a grown-up like Blugg. Management must provide wards against such attacks as part of their benefits package; otherwise, overseers would be dropping dead every day. Most likely he wouldn't even notice he had been attacked. She felt cold and stiff.

"Get the candle, we'll do the thing now," Rooster said. Then, when Dimity did not immediately respond, "Come on, you cow! Get a fucking move on!"

Grudgingly, the young hulder complied. She paused just long enough after wedging the candle between floorboards to make it seem she expected Rooster to charm it alight, thus emphasizing his weakness, then struck a lucifer match.

Sulfur spat and flared.

"Where's the gooly-doll?" Rooster asked.

Shame-faced, Skizzlecraw produced it. Rooster ran a thumb over the stomach to feel the sharp tips of the horn slivers poking through, then handed it to Stilt. "You do it," he said.

Automatically, Stilt glanced toward Dimity for her okay.

Dimity tightened her lips, nodded.

"Hush," Rooster commanded.

They were still. Outside could be heard overlay upon overlay of distant machine noises, friendly rumblings, groanings, and poundings. Directly beneath them, they could hear the regular creak-creak-creak, almost inaudible, of a rocker. Blugg was whistling the Elf King's Tune, varying the speed and lilt of it as the rocker sped up and slowed down.

"Now!" Rooster whispered.

Stilt shoved the doll into the flame.

It had been stitched from old nylons, and the cloth bubbled and blackened as the fire touched it. A horrid stench filled the air. Then the cotton stuffing went up with a small roar, and Stilt dropped the thing with a startled cry. He cringed back, sucking on his hand.

The instant the flames touched the doll's belly, Jane's mouth went numb. She gasped. Her tongue felt swollen and prickly, as if it had been brushed by stinging nettles. Of course! There were still trace amounts of her saliva on the nail parings. A blind fraction of the curse was working on her.

Maybe they could kill Blugg after all.

Skizzlecraw began to cry. But Rooster ignored her. Hellfire malice dancing in his eyes, he sat bolt upright in his bed, fists clenched and head thrown back. "Yes!" he cried. "Yes! Die, damn you, die!" And while Smidgeon and Little Dick frantically beat out the flames to keep them from spreading, he laughed in triumph.

At that instant, there came a pounding on the ceiling of the room below, and Blugg bellowed, "What's that you brats are up to? By the Mother, I'm coming up there, and I'm bringing the strap!"

They fell silent.

A minute later, they heard his heavy tread coming up the stairs, and the lighter, more sprightly sound of leather tapping thigh.

Rooster looked stricken. The children scurried for their beds, hoping against hope to be spared the general punishment, Jane among them. But she noticed that Thistle was smirking with satisfaction.

Dimity was their leader now.

3.

Everybody blamed Jane.

Immediately after the doll's sacrifice, Jane came down with a light fever. Stilt stopped speaking altogether for three days. Skizzlecraw's hands and face blotched up with a rash. She turned sullen as well, but that was so in keeping with her prior character that it was little remarked by the other children. It was obvious to all that the curse was puissant, and an explanation was needed for why Blugg had not been hurt by it.

Dimity told them all, and Thistle backed her up, that Jane had lost her nerve in Blugg's office and come out without the nail parings. In her weakened state, Jane did a poor job of defending herself. And the shadowboy was so bewildered and confused by the argument that he was of no help whatsoever.

Rooster knew the truth, of course; he had felt the parings with his own fingers. But he said nothing. After his moment of triumph, he had suffered a physical relapse and fallen back into silence and dead-eyed suspicion. So Jane was left totally friendless.

Her isolation was heightened by the new position Blugg had secured for her. Jane had to wear a day-glo orange vest to mark her as a messenger. It had two panels, front and back, that fit over her head, and was cinched at the waist by four ties of black plasticized cloth. She felt awkward wearing it, and exposed.

The work was easy, but unfamiliar. For her training period she trailed after Blugg as he made his rounds, and kept her mouth shut. "This is the meter house," he'd grunt, or "Here's where you get the emery powder, small bags only, and be sure to keep the yellow copy of the order slip." Jane was astonished to discover how much less Blugg had to do than his charges; his work seemed to her an aimless wandering process that consisted largely of long, incomprehensible conversations half-business and half-gossip. Sometimes he played dominoes with a squattie man in Purchasing, the two of them hunched motionless over a plank, peering suspiciously at each other and cheating when they could.

"Wash your face," he told her one lunchbreak. "Your hands too, and scrub under the nails. You have to make a good impression."

"Why?" she asked.

"Never you mind why! What business is it of yours why? You just do as you're told." Blugg followed her into the lavatory, and stood over her as she washed, making sure she lathered up with the brown soap, and at one point rubbing out a stain on the side of her ear with his own spittle.

They walked through a cold drizzle to a small office near the main gate. Blugg knocked, and they entered.

Inside, an elegantly lean elf-wife dressed in black sat smoking a cigarette and staring out the window. She turned her head when they entered, all powder and high cheekbones. Without any particular emphasis she said, "Is this she?"

"It's her," Blugg agreed.

The elf-wife stood. She was a good head and a half taller than Blugg. Heels clicking briskly, she strode to Jane and pinched her chin between thumb and forefinger. She turned Jane's head one way, then the other, frowning critically.

"She's an obedient thing," Blugg said wheedlingly. "Does exactly what she's told, snap of your fingers, doesn't have to be spoken to twice."

Jane stared up into the elf-wife's eyes. They were cold things, like grey chips of ice, and the flesh around them broke into complex structures of wrinkles, hinting at years and decades that had not been visible from across the room. Jane had a sudden vision of the flesh as nothing more than a thin mask stretched over the woman's skull.

Recognition of a kind sparked in those lustreless eyes. "Are you afraid of me?"

Jane shook her head fearfully.

"You should be." The elf-wife's breath smelled of candied sweets and nicotine. Two long pearls dangled from her ears, half as long as her forefinger, and carved into blunt-headed serpentine shapes. Her fingertips tightened on Jane's chin, until tears involuntarily filled her eyes.

At last those fingers freed Jane. "I'll give it some thought," she said. She waved a hand toward the door. "You may leave."

Outside, Blugg was in an inexplicably gleeful mood. "Do you know who that was?" he all but chortled. Not waiting for an answer, he said, "That was a Greenleaf. A Greenleaf!"

Jane forgot about the encounter almost immediately. It was but one odd incident out of many.

It was not long before Rooster was back at work. The demons in the joinery shop made a little cart for him to use until he was strong enough to walk, and Jane and Stilt would lead the daily procession to and from work, each pulling at one handle of the cart.

One evening as they were marched back to the dormitory, they were stopped by the main gate while the shifts changed. They waited in the shadow of the monstrous black Time Clock while a flood of workers shambled, limped and hopped by. The swing shift was letting out, and all the nonresident laborers were lined up before the Time Clock. They punched their cards, kissed the Goddess stone, and trudged off.

Stilt stared yearningly through the gate. Visible beyond were only the parking lot and the dusty curve of an asphalt road, but he stared as if they were a vision of the Western Isles. Blugg came up behind him, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Stilt looked up.

Blugg's wide mouth twisted into what might almost have been a smile. He plucked a tiny feather from the base of Stilt's neck and held it up to his squinting vision. "Haughhmm." He put the feather in his mouth and slowly, savoringly, let it melt on his tongue. "About time you were sent to the infirmary, innit?" he rumbled. "Jane! Remind me come morning to send this one to the Doc for—"

It was not at all certain that Stilt understood what was being said. But something within him broke. With a high, despairing cry, Stilt dropped the cart handle and ran.

Blugg swore and started to lumber after the boy. But fat as he was, he was no match for the small, lithe figure. Slack-jawed workers turned as Stilt darted by. Their motions were slow in contrast, like those of flies caught in sap already hardening toward amber. Jane clutched the sides of her skirt with both hands in an agony of dread.

"Don't do it, Stilt!" Rooster screamed. He sat bolt upright in his cart, face waxy and white. "Come back!"

But Stilt was beyond listening. Arms out to either side, he ran down the road. The creatures of the swing shift stood frozen, gaping dully after him. He ran past the Time Clock, and through the gate.

He was outside.

As he ran, his arms appeared to thicken and lift. His whole body was changing, in fact, his neck elongating, spine curving forward, legs atrophying as thin as pencils.

"He's growing older," one of the little ones whispered in flat astonishment.

"Stupid!" Dimity snapped. "What do you think a Time Clock is *for?*"

It was true. With every step away from the Time Clock, Stilt put on days, weeks, months. He was a child no more. He ran through his adolescent phase and coloration in no time at all. He was an adult now.

Then he was in the air and flying. For one wondrous instant, it was just as Jane had imagined it would be. He flapped his new wings wildly, straining upward, and surprised laughter fell from his mouth.

He was glorious.

The wall around the factory grounds hid him briefly as he rose. He reappeared overtop of the gate, headed east and dwindling. Then Stilt faltered, and lurched in the sky. His wild flappings grew weaker and less effective. His brown-and-russet coloring greyed. A feather drifted down from his wings. Then another. One after another, until they were as thick as flakes in a snowstorm.

Stilt fell.

On the way back to the dormitory, everyone was silent. Even Blugg, though white with rage, could find no words to express himself; he kept punching the air with impotent little jabs of his fist. Rooster's face was like stone.

Crawling back into her bed that night, Jane was surprised to find Rooster waiting for her, back against the wall, legs folded beneath him. A flash of alarm as harsh as an electric shock seized her. But before she could say anything, he shivered spasmodically and in a dry, toneless whisper said, "Something bad is happening to you." He swayed. "Something. . . . bad."

"Come on," she said, forcing solicitude into her voice. "You've got to get back to bed." She took his arm, shocked by how light he was, how little resistance he gave her, and led him to his own cot. Eased him down, and pulled up the blanket. Touching him was not so repulsive as she had thought it would be.

"No. You've got to. . . ." For the first time he opened his eye. It had no white. The pupil had swollen larger than his lid, opening a black, lightless hole completely out of the universe. She released his arm in fear. "Stilt . . . wasn't . . . the only one growing up. I have the sight. Not much, but a touch of it."

He shuddered again. The *awen* was upon him, moving about under his skin, threatening to splinter his bones from within. His slender frame writhed with the force of it, like an engine under too much strain.

Mastering her fear, Jane climbed in under the blanket, letting it engulf them both in its tentlike folds. She hugged Rooster to her. His flesh was cold as a corpse.

"You were in my dreams," he croaked. "I saw you."

"Hush."

"I lost my best friend," he said. "Not you too." His voice was fading now. His head thrashed to one side, then the other, as if trying to capture a fugitive thought. "We have seen the light at the end of the tunnel. Whip inflation now. Good fences make good neighbors."

"Hush, hush." She held him close, sharing her warmth and refusing to listen until eventually the *awen* left him. He lay panting and exhausted, grey-faced, cold, and sweating. Quietly, then, Jane stole back to her own bed.

One day Jane was let off work early. Blugg took her back to his room, a typical troll's den of black oak furniture and awkward ceramics of sentimental scenes. Puck stealing apples. The abduction of Europa. He stood her in the center of the room and inhaled deeply, noisily. His piggish little eyes looked pleased.

"At least you're not bleeding." He gestured toward a half-open door. "There's a tub in the next room. And soap. Take your time cleaning yourself."

It was small and dark next door and smelled warmly of ammonia and body gas. There was a bar of creamy white soap that smelled of lilacs resting on the lip of a zinc trough. Jane undressed and, seizing the soap in both hands like a sword, stepped into the steamy water.

She bathed slowly, thinking of napalm cannons, cannisters of elf-blight, and laser-guided ATS missiles. Contemplating the dragon's weapons systems made the voice stronger, strong enough that she could sense it, weak as a tickle, even when she wasn't physically touching the book.

She fell into a dreamlike trance, the water warm against her naked skin, the dragon's voice almost real, stroking the bar of floral soap slowly up and down her body. The wiring diagrams floated before her like a mandala.

The dragon seemed to be insisting that she not let Blugg touch her.

Jane didn't respond. She knew that the voice's admonitions, whether real or a projection of her own fears, were useless. Blugg would touch her as he wished. He was bigger than she, and would do whatever he wanted with her. It was the way things were.

Her silence brought up a burst of outrage, and she seemed to feel the dragon dwindling in the western sky and she herself left behind, a prisoner, alone and unchanging, stuck here forever. In that adrenal burst of anger were undercurrents of what could only have been fear.

Jane had been gently lathering the brush of downy hair that had recently sprouted between her legs. Now she released the soap, and it bobbed to the surface. She turned her head sideways to look at it, one eye underwater and one eye not. She pretended it was a boat, a galleon that would take her far, far away. The water rocked up and down in time with her breath. All the world seemed to float in her vision.

The floor creaked under approaching footsteps. She heard it as a chord of sound, the solider grumble and squeak coming from the ear out of the water and its watery twin from the one under. She felt Blugg's bulk at the back of her neck, and closed her eyes. The light dimmed as his shadow touched her.

"That's enough." She stared up into a crazily-skewed smile. "Rinse yourself, dry yourself off, and get dressed. We've got a date at the Castle."

The Castle was an anomalous brick mansion located just off the center of the plant grounds. Older than the factory buildings that had arisen to surround and intimidate it, it had all the stylishness of a biscuit box turned on its side. Its trim and brickwork were hidden under industrial grime and black stains reached down the walls like tear tracks from its eaves.

The thin elf-wife answered the door with a disapproving frown, and waved Jane inside. "You may return in two hours," she said, and shut the door in Blugg's face.

Wordlessly, she turned and walked away.

Jane had no choice but to follow.

The mansion was much larger inside than out. She was led down a narrow gallery in whose high dimness chandeliers hung like giant luminescent jellyfish, then up a set of stairs, and through a series of rooms. The house appointments were everywhere valuable but nowhere absolutely clean. The damask silk settees were frayed, and the lace curtains were brittle as old spiderwebs. The taint of cigarettes and furniture polish clung to the textured walls, echoing a thousand yesterdays that differed from each other not at all.

Through one doorway Jane saw a sitting room where all the furniture rested comfortably on the ceiling. Shelves of knicknacks and oil portraits hung upside down on the walls, and through the windows a grey drizzle fell up. The elf-wife frowned. "Not for us," she said, and shut the door firmly.

At last they came to rest in an unused bedroom, the four-poster's ancient hangings beginning to rip at the rings, a nightstand candle gone grey with dust and canting genteelly to one side. From a closet shelf, the elf-wife removed a large cardboard box. Tissue paper crackled.

"Put this on." She held out a pink dress.

Jane obeyed, folding her work things carefully as she removed them.

The elf-wife *tsk*ed when she saw Jane's underthings and from a dresser drawer removed better, made of silk. "These also."

The dress was shell pink, linen, with cup sleeves. It was smocked across the bodice with tiny pink flowers and green leaves embroidered onto the cloth. The smocking went down to the waist, and then the cloth fell straight to her knees. There was another circle of embroidered roses at the hem.

The elf-wife watched, frowning and smoking, as she dressed. "Youth is wasted on the young," she remarked at one point. But added no more.

The dress buttoned up the back with pearl buttons. By reaching around awkwardly, Jane was able to fasten almost all, but the final closure, a single pearl button at the back of her neck, defeated her. "Oh, for Cernunos' sake," the elf-wife said. She briskly stepped forward, and buttoned the collar.

"You may look at yourself in the mirror."

Standing before the oval claw-footed mirror, Jane expected to see anything other than what she did see: Herself. The dress was tight in the bodice, and it made her hips look big. It was for a child far younger than she. But it made her look not younger, or even different really, but more emphatically, awkwardly herself. She raised a hand and her reflection reached up yearningly to touch her. Her hand stopped just short of the glass.

"Please, ma'am. What am I supposed to do?"

"That should be obvious enough soon." She opened the door. "This way."

Five minutes later, they entered a den. Logs blazed in a high-arched fireplace. Pillars to either side supported tiled vaulting for a triple ceiling. The walls held paintings and photographs in ormolu and cloisonné frames, trophy antlers, religious fetishes in such profusion that the eye could not grasp them, and shelves of books in autumnal leather colors. The floor, by contrast, was empty save for a chaise lounge, a rocking chair and a scattering of rugs.

An elf-laird sat in the cushioned rocking chair, not rocking. He was old beyond belief, browned and gnarled as a tree stump. He stared straight ahead of himself.

"Father, this is young Jane. She's come to play here this evening."

The old laird's eyes swiveled around, but other than that he did not move.

"You'll enjoy that, won't you? You've always been fond of children."

Jane would have curtsied had she known how. But apparently that was not required of her. She stood in the center of the room while the elf-wife retrieved a large wooden box from behind the chaise.

Still the laird did not react. Only his eyes were alive, and they betrayed nothing of what he thought.

"Excuse me, please, ma'am," Jane said. "But what's wrong with him?"

Stiffly, the elf-wife said, "There is nothing wrong with him. He is Baldwynn of Baldwynn. Of the Greenleaf-Baldwynns. You will respect him accordingly. You have been brought here to brighten his evenings. If you behave properly, you will be allowed to return here on a regular basis. Otherwise, you will not. Do I make myself clear?

"Yes, ma'am."

"You may call me Mrs. Greenleaf."

"Yes, Mrs. Greenleaf."

The box of toys rested on the hearth rug. "Well," Mrs. Greenleaf said. "Play with them, child."

Uncertainly, Jane knelt by the box. She rummaged within. It contained a marvelous mix of things: A set of mymble-sticks with ivory and mother-of-pearl inlays. A small ferris wheel that really worked, with seats that swung down and all the signs of the Zodiac painted on its sides. A set of toy soldiers, with archers and mine sweepers, two full armies' worth, each with its own commanding wizard. A faerie bell that when shaken filled the mind with a soft chime, breathtaking when sounded and impossible to clearly remember an instant later. Jacks and a ball.

Mrs. Greenleaf had settled herself on the lounge. She unfolded a newspaper and began to read. Sometimes she would read an article aloud for the edification of her father.

For two hours, Jane played with the toys. It was nowhere near so much fun as might have been expected. She was constantly aware of the laird's presence, of his eyes boring through her back. Everything went into those eyes, and nothing came out. His was the unhealthiest aura she had ever felt, a powerful presence that felt dangerous, capricious, random. Now and then she would glance at his trousered legs, never higher, and his shiny polished wingtips. It was like being in the same room as an overloaded boiler, waiting to see if it was going to explode.

"Here's an interesting article. They're phasing out those old Neptune-class dreadnaughts, and converting the shipyards for missile ships. You own some of that stock, don't you?"

The Baldwynn sat in his chair, looking at nobody.

It was night when she got back to the door, in her own clothes again and oddly relieved to be free of that stuffy room, its uncanny laird, and the drear comments of Mrs. Greenleaf. Blugg stood on the stoop, shivering from the cold. His glance was dark when Jane met it.

"You may bring her back again at the same time in two days," the elf-wife said. Then, formally, "You have our gratitude."

Jane had expected Blugg would beat her. At the very least he would cuff her ear, and then complain and berate her all the way back to the dormitory. But once again, he seemed strangely elated by Mrs. Greenleaf's words.

"Gratitude!" he said. "You have our gratitude! That's worth something, indeed it is."

They did not go straight back to the dormitory, but cut through the storage yard to the smith shop, so Blugg could stop to have a drink with a boiler imp who lived in an outmoded annealing oven there. The imp was a slight, whiskered creature who obviously admired Blugg's bulk and self-assurance. He brought out a jug, and two tumblers.

"Did it work out well?" he asked anxiously. "How did it go?"

"It was a fucking triumph," Blugg asserted. "I have her gratitude. Her personal gratitude, mind you, the gratitude of a Greenleaf."

They clicked glasses, and the imp begged for details.

The shop was empty and, save for the red glows of the banked furnaces and a single bare bulb dangling over the imp's oven, dark. Left to her own devices, Jane eased back into the shadows. She found a warm niche around the curve of the oven and settled in among the cinders. It had a pleasant coke-smoky smell.

Feeling weary and unambitious, Jane leaned back and thought about her dragon. She had spent the last week studying diagrams of its electrical systems, and now she visualized them entire, a network of bright silver lines hung in space against a velvet sky. It was possible to rotate the image in her mind, and watch the wires close, converge and pass one another as they orbited first one axis and then another.

After a time, the sense of the dragon's presence grew strong within her. With it came a kind of nervous energy, a jumpy sort of strength that drove sleep away without necessarily making her feel any less weary.

There was a warmth to the dragon's presence, an almost smug satisfaction that she hadn't been touched. At the same time, there were unclean depths to it. The better she was coming to know it, the more Jane realized that, morally at least, the dragon was no better than Blugg or anyone else in the plant.

Still, they had common cause.

"He didn't want to," Jane whispered, uncertain she could be heard. Around to the other side of the oven, Blugg and the imp were laughing drunkenly. It was easy to distinguish between the mousy squeak and the deep, trollish rumble. "It wasn't anything I had any say over."

But the dragon's presence was affectionate and approving. A compulsion seized her then. Her feet became intolerably restless. She could not stay behind the stove one more second.

Silently, stealthily, she slipped away.

It was time she finally met the dragon.

4.

Jane slipped out into the storage yard. The dragon's presence filled her head like a hand inside a puppet. It was cold outside, and the earth was black. A few bitter flakes of snow, the first of the winter, drifted down from a low sky.

Feeling horribly exposed, she made her way down the narrow corridor between the smith shop and the erecting shop and past the mountainous stacks of iron boilerplate stock to the marshalling yards.

On the far side of a hurricane fence, the dragons rustled and clanked in their chains. Jane crept by, making herself small and insignificant, afraid of the carnivorous machines and painfully aware of their bloody and disdainful thoughts. In the shadow of a propane tank storage shed, she climbed the fence and dropped down into the yard.

A dragon snorted, sending her scurrying away in terror, like a leaf before the wind.

The dragons did not deign to notice the little figure darting through their shadows; their appetites for destruction were larger than anything a morsel such as she could satisfy. Cinders crunching underfoot, she hurried past the great lordly engines to a disused and overgrown corner of the yard.

There, between a pile of creosoted timbers and a hillock of moldering ammunition crates, was the ruined hulk of a dragon. It was half-buried in brambles and dried grasses, hollyhock and Queen Mab's lace. Rust had eaten holes in its boiler plates. On its side, in chipped, flaking numerals, was painted No. 7332.

Jane froze, trembling with dismay.

This couldn't be her dragon! "It's not even alive," she whispered. "It's *not.*" But, sick with disillusion, she knew she was wrong. It lived, crippled and demented, nursing one last spark of life within its broken carcass and harboring hallucinations. And she had been caught by its madness, by its fantasies of escape.

She wanted to turn, flee and never return. But a compulsion seized her then, and she could not control her body. Her legs walked her to the dragon's remains. Her arms reached for the ladder up its side. The rungs sounded underfoot as she climbed.

She stepped into the fire-gutted cabin, all rust and decay, and the door slammed behind her. Alone in the darkness, she smelled the mingled scents of burnt carbon and high-octane fuel. From the depths of the machine a hum arose. A faint vibration trembled the floor, and rode up her legs. The air was warm.

Slowly, as if some unseen hand were turning a rheostat, the instrument panels came on. A soft greenish light suffused the interior of the dragon.

The cabin was transformed.

What had been rust and carbonized plastic was now chromed steel, optical glass and ebony-smooth surfaces. The charred pillar in the center of the cabin revealed itself as the pilot's couch, dark crimson leather with cushioned armrests.

Jane slid into the chair. It adjusted to her weight, hugging her hips, rising to support her back. Everything was positioned exactly as the grimoire had said it would be. She ran her hands over the engine instrumentation. At the flick of a switch the cybernetics curled themselves about her. She seized the rubber grips at the ends of the armrests and gave them a quarter turn. Twin needles slid painlessly into her wrists.

Camera wraparounds closed about Jane's eyes. She peered through the dragon's virtual imaging systems into a spectrum wider than human vision, trebling high into the infrared and booming deep into the ultraviolet. The yards were tangled orange and silver lines of power, the brick walls of the shop buildings purple quartz cliffs. Overhead, the stars were pinpricks of red and orange and green.

Then she fell, without a shock, into the dragon's memories, and was flying low over Lyonesse on a napalm run. Pink clouds blossomed in her wake, billowing over saturated green rainforests. She felt the shudder of hypersonic acceleration, the laminar flow of air over wing surfaces as she made a tight roll to avoid the guns of an anti-dragon emplacement. The airwaves were alive with radio messages, screams of rage and triumph from her cousins and the passionless exchange of positionals by the pilots. Black specks appeared at the horizon, an enemy squadron scrambled to meet them. Gleefully, she turned to meet the challenge.

Jane was trembling with adrenaline and surrogate emotion. In what was almost a sob, she cried, "Who are you?"

I am the spear that screams for blood.

Armies clashed in a continent of permanent night. The dragon's mind encompassed them all, cold as a northern ocean and as vast. Jane was half-drowning in its dreams of violence. A snapshot flash of elven warriors on the ground, spears held high as they posed behind a mound of trophy heads. Their grins were electric, wide, ecstatic. A line of trolls burning like torches. A city by the sea swelling in her gunsights, its slim towers shattering into crystal shards and dust. Tears streamed down her cheeks, big and wet and warm.

She was soaring now, alone, above clouds that shone brighter than hundred-watt bulbs, the air as cold as ice and thinner than a dream. The dragon's lust for blood was hers, and she felt the appeal of it, the beauty of its cruel simplicity. "No! No, I mean—what is your name?"

Abruptly, she was dumped clear of the memories, and found herself sitting damp and exhausted in the control couch, wrists stinging as the needles withdrew. Through the wraparounds she saw a dragon crouched on the far side of the lot, one clawed forearm raised. It stared unblinking at the moon. A voice as harsh and cool as static from distant stars spoke over the headphone speakers in the wraparounds. "You may call me 7332."

Jane felt unclean. Relieved as she was to be free of the dragon's mind, she yearned to enter it again, to once again feel that keen freedom from doubt and hesitation. Staring at the dragon across the lot, she felt the urge to climb in it and fly away, fly away forever, never to return.

"And so you shall," 7332 promised.

"Can I really?" Suddenly Jane found that hard to imagine. "Outside you look so . . . rusted, broken."

"Stealth technology, little savior. If our masters knew I was yet functional, they'd finish the job they began when I was first brought here. I'm too dangerous for them to ignore."

Jane's fingers ran lightly over the panels, caressing the potentiometer knobs and stroking the rowed switches she had night after night memorized from the grimoire. To have them before her in actuality made her giddy with possibility.

"Can we leave now?" she asked.

A deep engine noise thrummed up from the engine and through Jane's entire body. 7332 was chuckling. "You have the grimoire, that's a start. With that and three keys, we can leave anytime."

"Three keys?"

"The first is a ruby with a chromium taint at its heart."

"I've seen that!" Jane said, startled. "I've—" She stopped. "Was that your doing?"

"You must pay heed. Our time is short. The ruby will enable my laser guidance system. That is the first key. The second is a small thing. It looks like a walnut, but is made of brass and is cool to the touch."

"I've seen that . . . " Jane said uncertainly.

"It is in the box of toys in the Baldwynn's study." Jane started. "You must bring it to me; it contains part of my memory. The third key we already have: You."

"Me?"

"You, O changeling. Why do you think the Tylwyth Teg stole you in the first place? To sweat and swelter in the factories? Not cost-effective! No, you are merely being held here until you are old enough to be used. Dragons, as you must know, are built of cold iron around a heart of black steel. We generate a magnetic force which is carcinogenic to the elf-lords and their underlings. They cannot pilot us themselves. A pilot needs mortal blood."

"Then . . . I'm to be a pilot?" It was a dazzling future, and for a second Jane was blinded by ambition and forgot about escape entirely.

7332 laughed, not kindly. "A human pilot? Impossible! Pilots must be trustworthy, loyal to the system, bound to it by blood and training. It is only the half-blooded who are ever licensed to fly dragons.

"No, you were brought here as a breeder."

It took her a moment to absorb his meaning. When she did, it was with the shock of a physical blow. They wanted her to be a brood mare! To grow children for them—half-elven children who would be taken away at birth to be raised as warriors. She burned with cold wrath. "Tell me your name," she said.

"I have given it already."

"That's just your serial number. I need your name to get your operational specifications." There were hundreds of models this creature might be; the grimoire's index went on forever. Without the master key, a serial number told her nothing. "I can't operate you without your op specs."

"No names."

"I *must!*"

A touch of anger entered that cold, staticky whisper. "Changeling, what do you take me for? I am great beyond your kind. Your place is to free me; in return, I will take you away. Do not aspire beyond yourself."

"I can't release your bonds without knowing your true name," Jane lied. "It says so in the grimoire!"

The lights went off.

Jane sat in the dark, amid the dying whines of servomechanisms withdrawing the cybernetics. The door slammed open.

The glamour was either renewed or lost, for in the cold moonlight the interior of 7332 was again blasted and lifeless. Jane stood, swiping at the flakes of burnt vinyl that clung to the back of her dress. "I'm not changing my mind!" she said defiantly. "You need my help. So if you want to be free again, you have to give me your name." She waited, but there was no response.

She left.

Blugg had a plan. Jane had no notion what it might be, but the machinations of it kept her busy throughout the days that followed, scurrying from the spring shop to the scale house, from motion work to the bolt shop and then back again by way of the metaphysics lab. She was sent to the cylinder machine shop to reserve three days' time on the boring mills, then across to the tender shop to collect a sealed envelope from an old demoted engineer who had lost one eye and both his ears to some long ago corporate discipline. When she went to the chemical supplies room to see how much jellied bryony compound was on hand and not already spoken for, the supply clerk put down his wirerims and glared at her through pink-edged eyes. "Why does Blugg want to know?" he asked.

Jane shrugged uneasily. "He didn't tell me."

"You must know *some*thing." The clerk was brown as bark and so grotesquely thin his eyes stuck out to either side; he looked to be an assemblage of twigs, like the stick men that were hung from poles and set ablaze on Hogmanay night. Rattling his fingers at her, he said, "Underlings always know." What he must have thought an ingratiating grin split his face. "Creeping and sneaking about like mice, little whiskery noses into everything."

"No, really."

"Bullshit!" He slammed the counter. "It's something to do with Grimpke, isn't it? The earless old bastard in Section A?" He turned his head sideways, so one eye could peer down at her. "I thought so! Something to do with his famous leg-assembly, no doubt." He eased back, cackling. "Well if *that's* what Blugg thinks is going to make him Management's darling, you can tell him—You can tell him—" A crafty look came over his thin face. "No, don't say that. Tell him," he twisted about to peer over a shoulder at the ranks of barrels arrayed on steel-mesh shelving behind him, "tell him that we've only got half a barrel of the bryony and if he wants more he'll need documentation from the boys in the labs."

As Jane left, she heard the supply clerk laughing behind her. "Grimpke! What a joke!"

* * *

When next she crawled into the wall, Jane did not settle into the little nest she had made there. Leaving the grimoire below, she climbed up between the walls, searching out the braces and supports for places to set her bare feet. It was surprisingly easy. Carefully she climbed all the way up to the very top. There she followed the cool currents of air until she found their source, a trapdoor that had long ago provided access to the roof.

When she tried it, she found that it had been tarpapered over, and would not open. But it would not take any great effort for her to steal a knife.

The next day, toward shift's end, Rooster approached her with a new plan of escape. They were in the midst of a seasonal production slowdown, and rather than take them back to the dormitory early, Blugg had given the children brooms and barrels of sweeping compound and set them to work cleaning the floors of the pattern shop.

It was all make-work. The floors were built of enormous oaken beams almost a century ago, so warped and ground away by generations of feet that the wood between the lines of grain was worn into deep ruts and cracks, forming inexhaustible wells of dirt and dust. No amount of sweeping would clean them.

But so long as the children made a pretense of working, Blugg stayed in the pattern-master's office and left them alone. Jane could see the cubby through the window-wall that ran the length of the building, just below the ceiling: a modest warren of desk spaces, all carpeted and clean, a calm and different world from the one in which she labored. Grimpke was up in the borrowed office with him. The two old ogres bent low and solemn over their production schedules.

"Look." Rooster shook a dustpan full of dirt and waxy crumbs of compound in Jane's face. "Where do you think this stuff goes?"

Jane pushed it away. "Back to the floor, soon enough."

"Very funny. No, listen. We dump it in those dustbins, right? Then later, there's a couple of pillywiggins haul them out and dump the trash in a dumpster, okay? Along with scraps and sawdust, packaging, cannisters of chemical waste and the like. Then a truck comes along and empties the dumpsters. Where do you think that truck goes?"

"The cafeteria."

"Chucklehead! It goes out through a service gateway in the east wall. Nowhere near the Time Clock—get it? Nowhere near the Time Clock."

"Get real. You want to climb into a trash truck's belly? Have you ever seen the teeth on those things? They're sharp as razors and bigger than you are. That thing gets you into its maw, and you're as good as dead."

"Are you sure of that?"

"No, of course I'm not sure. But it's not worth taking a chance on."

Rooster looked cunning. "Let's say the only way out is past the Clock, then. How do people get by it? With their punchcards, right? But suppose we could get hold of a couple of cards. If we could find some way to delay whoever normally used 'em, we could. . . ."

"Include me out." Jane began sweeping vigorously away.

"Jane!" Rooster hurried after her. With a quick glance upward, he seized her arm and swung her into the shadow of a pillar. "Jane, why are you against me? All the others are on Dimity's side, except for you. And Dimity hates your guts. So whose side are you on? You have to choose."

"I'm not going to be on anybody's side anymore," she said. "Sides are stupid."

"What will it take?" he asked desperately. "What will it take to get you back on my side again?"

He wasn't going to stop pestering her until she agreed to be a part of his idiot schemes. Well, she had resolved to do whatever it took to get out of here. She might as well turn this to her advantage. "Okay, I'll tell you what. You go places I don't. Steal me a hex-nut. A virgin nut, mind you. One that's never been used."

Mercurial as ever, Rooster leered and grabbed his crotch.

"I'm sick of putting up with your crude jokes too. Help me or don't, I don't much care which. But if you're not willing to do a little thing like this for me, I don't see why I should be expected to put myself out for you."

In a hurt tone, Rooster said, "Hey, what'd I ever do to you? Ain't I always been your friend?" He closed his good eye and put a finger alongside his nose. "If I help you, will you help me? With my plan?"

"Yeah, sure," Jane said. "Sure I will."

When he was gone, Jane wearily swept her way to the far dark end of the shop. It had been such a long day, and she still had to go to Mrs. Greenleaf's to play. She fervently hoped Blugg wouldn't get so caught up in his project that he'd leave her waiting in the Castle's foyer as he had the past three days running.

Dimity was waiting in the shadows for her, and seized her just below the shoulder.

"Ow!" Her poor arm was getting all bruised.

But Dimity only squeezed all the tighter. "What were you and Rooster talking about?"

"Nothing!" she cried.

Dimity stared at her long and hard, with eyes like two coiled snakes. Finally she released Jane and turned away. "Better be nothing."

As the winter weeks progressed, Blugg's plans ripened toward fruition. Creatures in suits began dropping by to confer with him. He grew more expansive and dressed with greater care, adding a string tie to his work shirt and bathing three times a week. Over in the erecting shop in an unused assembly bay—closed for structural repairs that wouldn't be scheduled until the economic climate picked up—a prototype of Grimpke's leg assembly was taking shape.

During one of her trips to Section A, Jane pocketed a scrap of green leather from the floor of the trim shop. She stole some heavy thread and a curved needle, and sacrificed some of her time with the grimoire to make Rooster an eyepatch. It was more work than she'd intended, and she was feeling peevish by the time it was done. But when she woke Rooster to give it to him, he was so touched and delighted by the present, she felt put to shame.

"This is *great!*" He sat up in bed and unwrapped the rag from his head, revealing for a hideous instant the ruin of his eye. Then he ducked his head, tugged on the band to adjust it, and when he straightened he was the old Rooster again. His smile went up further on one side of his face than the other, as if trying to compensate for the lack of balance higher up. His forelocks fell over the strap in a swaggering, piratical sort of way.

He hopped off the bed. "Where's a mirror?"

Jane shook her head, laughing silently, his joy was so infectious. Because of course there were no mirrors in the dormitory or anywhere near it. Industrial safety regulations forbade them.

Rooster tucked thumbs into armpits, making wingtips of his elbows, and stood on one leg. "Dimity better watch out for me now!"

Alarmed, Jane said, "Oh, don't pick a fight with her. Please don't."

"I didn't pick this fight."

"She's stronger than you are. Now."

"It's only the other kids that make her so strong. Without their faith in her, she's nothing. All that power will come flowing back to me as soon as I kill Blugg."

"You can't kill Blugg."

"Just watch me."

"Well, I'm not going to listen to any of this," Jane said. "I'm going to bed." And she did.

But she had an awful feeling her innocent gift had started something spinning out of control.

Jane was standing on call outside Blugg's office when Rooster sidled up with the hex-nut he'd promised to steal. He favored her with a one-eyed wink and pressed it into her hand.

"Is it cherry?" she asked.

"Sure it is," Rooster said. "What do you take me for? Some kind of a hardware-fucker?"

"Don't be crude." Jane slipped the nut under her vest and into a pocket. She was getting to be a pretty good thief; the motions were all but automatic by now. To her surprise she found that she actively enjoyed stealing things. There was a dark, shivery thrill to putting herself in danger and yet eluding punishment.

By the time Jane got back from the Castle that night, the other children were asleep. With practiced swiftness, she stripped off her smock, slipped under her bed, and lifted the loose board. Agile as a night-ape, she scaled the inside of the wall.

The wind was a lash across Jane's flesh. She crouched low on the roof, blue-skinned with cold. But Dame Moon gave her strength to endure it. With all her will, she stared at the hex-nut in her hand, focusing on the memorized specs: its dimensions, weight and sheering strength, the exact composition of its alloy.

Nothing happened.

She joggled it into the exact center of her palm, concentrating on the heft and feel of it, the pale gleam of moonlight on its faceted surface, the tight coil of the thread down its core. With an almost audible click, she felt her knowledge of it snap together into a perfect whole.

I know you, she thought. Fly.

It rose spinning in the air.

Jane felt content. Knowing the hex-nut's nature gave her power over it. It had to do what she wanted. Similarly, she knew that for all the dragon's silence, 7332 needed her. Someday it would have to call her. She would be ready then. She would have all its specs down by heart. And when they left, she'd leave knowing the dragon's name.

In control.

"What are you doing up here?"

Jane spun around in horror. Rooster was climbing up through the trapdoor. He had a big shit-eating grin on his face and Jane, remembering her nudity, vainly tried to cover herself with her hands. "Don't look!"

"Too late. I've already seen everything." Rooster laughed. "You look like Glam herself, riding the roofs." He reached into the shadows behind him and brought out a blanket. Carelessly he draped it over her shoulders. "There. That ought to prove I'm on your side, after all."

"Oh. Sides again." Blushing, Jane tugged the blanket tight about her.

Rooster stood on tiptoe, straining an arm toward the moon, as if he thought he could pluck it down from the sky. He pulled himself so high and thin it seemed as if he were trying to make himself one with the wind. "Hey, nice view you got here." He squinted down at her. "Would it make you feel any better if I took my clothes off too?" He began unbuttoning his trousers.

"No!"

"Oh well." Rooster shrugged and rebuttoned himself. Then, abruptly, he dropped to his knees before her. "Jane, I've been thinking and thinking how to get you to like me again."

"I do like you, Rooster. You know that." Jane edged away from him and he followed her on his knees so that the distance between them remained unchanged.

"Yeah, but you won't help me. You say you will, but you don't really mean it. I mean, you know what I mean?"

She lowered her eyes. "Yeah."

Rooster's voice grew small, as if he were admitting to something shameful. Jane had to strain to make out his words. "So what I thought was maybe we should tell each other our true names."

"What?"

"You know. You tell me yours, and I'll tell you mine. That means you really trust somebody, because when they know your true name, they can kill you like *that!*" He snapped his fingers.

"Rooster, I'm human."

"So? I don't hold that against you." His expression was bruised, wounded. He was perfectly vulnerable to her now, even without knowing his secret name. Jane's heart ached for him.

Gently, she said, "I don't have a true name."

"Shit." Rooster went to the very edge of the roof and for the longest time stared straight down at the faraway ground. Jane was seized with dread for him, but simultaneously feared to call out lest he should fall. Finally he put his arms out full length to either side and spun around. He stalked toward her. "I'm going to tell you anyway."

"Rooster, no!"

"It's Tetigistus. That means Needle." He folded his arms. His face had taken on an eerily peaceful cast, as if all his cares and worries had suddenly fallen away. Jane found herself almost envying him. "There. Now you can do anything you want with me."

"Rooster, I don't know what to say."

"Hey, you still haven't told me what you're doing up here." The hexnut had fallen from the air when Rooster first spoke. All this time she had been holding it clutched in one fist. Now Rooster unfolded her fingers and took the nut from her. "Ahhhh." He peered at her through the bore. "So that's what you wanted it for. You're learning how to use things' names against them."

Numbly Jane nodded. "Yes, I . . . I found this grimoire, see—"

"Yeah, right, I stepped on it down at the bottom of the wall." Rooster's voice burned fierce with joy. "Oh, that's perfect. That means anything can be turned against Blugg! We can crush him under boiler stock, call down molten brass on him, fill his arteries with particulate lead."

"Rooster, why this fixation on Blugg? Give it up. Revenge isn't going to help you escape."

"Oh, I don't care about escape."

"But you said—"

"Only because that's what you wanted. Since my sickness, since I lost my eye, the sight has been getting stronger within me every day. What do I care what side of the factory gates I'm on? Right here and now I can see worlds like nothing you've ever imagined. Things you don't have the words for. And sometimes I get premonitions." He frowned with unRoosterlike solemnity and said, "That's why I keep trying to warn you. You're caught in something, and the more you try to get loose, the more tangled you become." Then he laughed, Rooster again. "But now we're working together! First you'll help me kill Blugg, and then we'll lift his punchcard and we can walk out free. It's so simple it's beautiful."

Jane felt awful. Rooster's plans were not hers. There was no way 7332 was going to let her take Rooster along when she left. She could feel the dragon's presence even now, a saturating medium pervasive everywhere in the plant. Even here, weakened by the moonlight, its influence was yet tangible. She could feel the iron certainty of its revulsion in the back of her skull. "It won't work. It's just another of your childish fantasies."

"Don't be like that. You're just letting yourself get all caught up in the illusion of existence." He held out a hand. "Here, let me show you."

She took his hand. "Show me? How?"

"You know my name, don't you? Well, use it."

"Teti. . . Tetigistus," she said hesitantly. "Show me what you see."

They were walking down a dark winter sidewalk. Patches of unshoveled snow had been trodden down to black lumps, hard as rock and slippery as ice. Stone-and-glass buildings soared up out of sight. Lights were everywhere, lining the endless shop windows, twinkling in scrawny leafless trees, spelling out words in enormous letters in an alphabet strangely familiar but undecipherable to her. The streets were choked with machines that moved as if they were alive, but had no voices of their own, only the roar of their engines and the blare of horns.

"Where are we?" Jane asked wonderingly.

Rooster shook his head. They walked on, among throngs of silent, shadowy people. Nobody spoke to them or jostled them. It was as if they were ghosts.

In a window they saw evergreen trees spangled with popcorn and foil and strings of gingerbread soldiers. Beneath the firs were heaped an ogre's hoard of toys, bears in harness beating small drums, machines that were glossy miniatures of those in the street, dolls in lace-trimmed taffeta, a stuffed giraffe half as large as life.

Jane had never seen anything or anyplace like this repository of alien wealth, but some resonant echo of the spirit told her that this place was in some way identical to or congruent with the world of her earliest memories, that time and place when she had been small and protected and happy. She began to cry. "Rooster, take me home, please."

He turned to her in surprise and unthinkingly released her hand.

They were back on the factory roof again.

"There." Rooster kissed her on the cheek. "Now we trust each other completely," he said.

Time was getting short. Jane could feel the grinding vibration of events coming together as the machineries of fate moved them about. The next night, as she was making a pretense of playing with the toys, Jane closed her hand around the nugget of brass 7332 wanted. As a distraction she lifted a glory-hand free of the box, waving it back and forth as if she were playing sorceress. This made Mrs. Greenleaf happy, she knew, acting childish; the more childish she acted the happier the old elf was.

Craftily, she turned her body to hide the theft, drawing the nugget close with a languid gesture of her hand, and secreting it among her clothes. Mrs. Greenleaf, busy with pencil and magazine, noticed nothing. Casually, though the Baldwynn never looked directly at anything, Jane glanced up at him to make sure he also was not watching.

She gasped.

The elf-laird was not in his chair. Where he had been now floated an egg of light. It pulsed gently. Pale colors played over its cold, featureless surface. She cringed away from the thing, irrationally afraid that it would leave the chair and come after her.

Mrs. Greenleaf looked up from her acrostics. "Jane," she said warningly. "Is there a problem?"

"No, Mrs. Greenleaf," Jane said hastily.

But Mrs. Greenleaf had already turned toward her father. Her mouth opened in a round little O and her eyes bulged as if she had been suddenly ensorcelled into a fish. Her distress was so comically extreme that Jane had to fight down the urge to giggle.

Magazines sliding from her lap, the old elf-wife stood. She seized Jane's hand in a grip that was thoughtlessly painful, and hauled her straightaway from the room.

Once the door was firmly shut, Mrs. Greenleaf turned to Jane, the skin on her face taut and white, her mouth a lipless slit. "You saw nothing tonight, do you understand?" She shook Jane's arm for emphasis. "Nothing!"

"No, ma'am."

"We are an old family, a respectable family, there has been no trace of scandal since—what are you looking at?"

"Nothing." Jane was afraid that the elf-wife would strike her. But instead, she was led directly to the dressing room, even though her time here was only half done. Her work clothes were returned to her, and her play dress and lacy underthings packed away once more in white paper. It was early still, at least an hour before Blugg was scheduled to pick her up, when she was deposited out on the front steps.

"I *don't* think it will be necessary for you to return tomorrow," Mrs. Greenleaf said firmly.

She closed the door.

Blugg was half an hour late picking her up. Jane awaited him in an agony of expectation. When he finally arrived, startled to find her standing outside instead of in the foyer as in times previously, he demanded to know why. Then, when she told him what Mrs. Greenleaf's last words had been, he threw back his head and howled. It was a terrible sound, compounded of pain and the misery of broken dreams.

When they got back to the dormitory, he beat her.

5.

It was agony getting out of bed the next morning. Jane's side burned with pain. One leg buckled slightly when she put weight on it, giving her an odd, twisting limp. She had to spoon her gruel through the left side of her mouth; the right was swollen shut by a lump the size of an egg.

Blugg took one look at Jane and yanked the messenger's vest from her back. He tossed it to Dimity, who slipped it over her head and followed him off to his office with a triumphant little flip of her skirts.

To her humiliation and amazement, Jane discovered that losing the position actually hurt.

But Blugg's project did not collapse with the loss of the Baldwynn's supposed sponsorship. It had taken on its own momentum; too great a mass of ambitious middle-management types had invested their time and prestige in the enterprise to allow it to die.

Paradoxically, the project picked up speed with Mrs. Greenleaf's dismissal of Jane. The prototype, which had for weeks stood in unhasty incompletion in its assembly bay, was rapidly finished, tested, and packed with grease. Smidgeon, Creep, and Three-eyes spent an entire day polishing its surface until it shone like mirrors.

Nights, Rooster would crawl into the wall to pore over the grimoire. He insisted that Jane show him the chapter dealing with cam assemblies and went over all the diagrams again and again until he was sure he had identified the one the wizened old engineer Grimpke had used in the prototype.

"We don't have much time," he told Jane. "I was talking with Hob—that's Hob the whitesmith's gaffer, not one-legged Hob—and he said there's some lord high muckety-muck from the head office coming down to look over the leg in five days. The inspector general from the office for applications assessment." He all but sang the words: Rooster was inordinately fond of high-flown titles. "Word on the floor is that they had to pull a lot of strings to get the I.G. down here, and now they're all running around like Lady Corus, trying to get everything firmed up in time."

"I don't see how you can expect to have all those figures memorized in five days," Jane whispered back. It was close within the wall and even though she was fully clothed, she felt embarrassed being squished up against Rooster this way. "There must be seven pages!"

"I'll manage it," he said grimly.

He frowned over the numbers, face dim and almost unseeable in the silvery runelight. Jane knew how hard what he was trying to do could be. She had cranked down her own ambitions from total mastery of her dragon to control of several key functions in its optical and processing systems. "I don't even believe you can read the numbers."

"Sure I can."

"What's this say, then?" She jabbed a finger at the runes signifying 3.2 ohms.

"Look, I don't need to *understand* the squiggles to memorize them. I can see how they look every bit as well as you can. I'll just memorize them as pictures."

It was an impossible task that Rooster had set for himself. Jane left him there and went back to bed, grateful for the chance to get some sleep and sure that Rooster would give it up after a day's effort, two at most. She could return to her studies when he did.

But he did not. That night and the next and the three after that, Rooster crept into the wall and stayed till dawn communing with the grimoire. Jane found herself resenting the time he spent there. It was, after all, *her* book, and she had serious need of it. Rooster, though, shrugged off all her hints, suggestions, and finally demands that they alternate nights studying the grimoire.

There was no talking to him. Rooster was obsessed.

The night before the scheduled inspection, the children were all lined up at the tub room and given baths, even though it was the middle of the week. One at a time they were called in. Dimity oversaw the girls, wielding a stiff brush to catch any places they might have themselves missed, while Blugg watched with frank amusement.

The brush was wielded with particular vigor when it was Jane's turn in the zinc trough. Dimity seemed to be demonstrating something to Blugg, something Jane could not decipher. "Get those clothes off, you slut!" she shouted. "Show some motion."

Jane stared fixedly away from Blugg as she undressed, and climbed awkwardly into the tub. She was largely recovered from her beating, but the bruises still lingered, yellow and black around purple clouds, like bad weather just beneath the skin. The water was still warm, and thin oily streaks of soap floated on its grey surface.

"You've beshit yourself, you pig!"

"I have not!" Jane cried involuntarily.

"What's that, then?" Dimity thrust the scrub brush between Jane's legs, and scrubbed with hard, fast strokes, forcing tears to her eyes. "It's all up and down the crack of your ass." Jane splashed and floundered away, and Dimity followed her to the far end of the tub, scouring her bottom with the sharp nylon bristles.

"Here!" She threw a dirty washrag into Jane's face. "Wipe your face. It's filthy."

When Jane was getting dressed, she timidly glanced up and saw an odd look pass between Dimity and Blugg, enigmatic and yet conspiratorial, freighted with terrible meaning.

An unhealthy smile came and went on Rooster's face at breakfast. His fingers trembled slightly, and his gaze was darting and distracted. Since he had started crawling into the wall at night, his face had grown even more sallow and drawn; a constant weariness hung about him now. But an unnatural energy underlay his exhaustion this morning, like an electrical current pushing his muscles toward spasm.

"Rooster?" Jane said quietly. Nobody else noticed the state he was in.

They were all preoccupied by the nearing inspector general's visit. "You mustn't feel bad if things don't. . . ." She couldn't bring herself to say it.

"This is the day." He flashed her a weird, scary grin. "You know something? Lately I've been hearing Stilt's voice again. Like he wasn't really dead, but hiding somewhere in the shadows, or maybe in the back of my skull, you know? Well, I think Stilt is going to like today. This one is going to be for him."

"Yes, but if—"

"Shhh!" He winked and laid a finger alongside of his nose, just as Dimity came slinking up to order them into marching formation for work. "How's it hanging, *Dim*ity?"

"You just better watch yourself." She grabbed his ear between thumb and forefinger and pinched. "If you fuck up today, your ass is grass, buster." Then she let go.

Rooster ducked his head and looked away and when she was just one too many steps distant to turn back without losing dignity, remarked to Jane, "Sounds just like Blugg, dunshe?"

Dimity stiffened, but kept on walking.

Dimity suffered a mishap on the way to work that morning, just as they were marching by the pitch yards. She was striding past Rooster, making sure the line was straight, when there was a sudden flurry of motion and Thistle lurched and fell against her. Caught unprepared, she was sent spilling to one side, head-first into a bucket of hot tar. When she stood, sputtering, she looked like a golliwog, face black and hair glistening.

The children laughed.

"Shut up!" Dimity gasped. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Her mouth gaped comically. She furiously swiped at her eyes, trying to clean the tar away.

Blugg exploded. "Get out of here! You fucking stupid brat. Go straight to the tub room and get scrubbing! I want that shit off your face by noon if you have to take the skin with it."

"But it wasn't my fault," Dimity wailed. "It was—"

"Go!" Blugg swung around and jabbed a thick finger at Rooster. "You! Go to stores and get a messenger's vest. A brand new one, mind, the best they have! Cernunos knows, you're not much, but you'll have to do."

"Yes, sir, absolutely, sir." Rooster grabbed his forelock and tugged, bowing himself down low to hide the leer of triumph on his face.

That day felt longer than any Jane could remember. Though they got no work done at all—appearances mattered, so they couldn't handle grease or polish—the children were constantly being shuttled from worksite to worksite, broken into groups and urgently gathered together again, so that a jumpy sense of unease extended through the morning deep into the afternoon.

At last, late in the day, the inspector general arrived.

A wave of dread preceded the elf-lord through the plant. Not a kobold or korrigan, not a spunky, pillywiggin, nor lowliest dunter but knew the inspector general was coming. The air shivered in anticipation of his arrival. A glimmering light went just before him, causing all heads to turn, all work to stop, the instant before he turned a corner or entered a shop.

He appeared in the doorway.

Tall and majestic he was in an Italian suit and tufted silk tie. He wore a white hardhat. His face was square-jawed and handsome in a more than human way, and his hair and teeth were perfect. Two high-ranking Tylwyth Teg accompanied him, clipboards in hand, and a vulture-headed cost analyst from Accounting trailed in his wake.

Blugg stood straight and proud in a mixed welcoming line of upper and middle management. His face and horns were scrubbed so clean their surfaces were faintly translucent. Rooster stood by his side and a little behind, an accessory to his dignity. Old Grimpke was present as well, hunched over slightly and rubbing his hands with grinning nervousness. The prototype leg-and-claw mechanism was upended in the center of the room.

The workers had been lined up against the walls, arrayed by size and function, like so many tools on display. The children stood straight and scared against the wall behind their overseer. Dimity was to the far end of the line from Jane, her face red with suppressed anger. She'd had to cut off most of her hair to get rid of the tar, which gave her a plucked and lopsided look totally disqualifying her from standing in the welcoming line with Blugg.

Rooster twisted around in line to peer intently at first Dimity, then Jane. He flashed his shirt open and shut again, revealing a near-subliminal glimpse of a white cardboard rectangle pressed against his flesh.

It was Blugg's punchcard.

He raised an eyebrow, and his one eye filled with cold inhuman light. Then he faced forward again, posture stiff and correct.

"What was that?" Little Dick whispered. "That white thing in Rooster's shirt?" And Smidgeon echoed. "Yeah, what?"

"Shut the fuck up!" Jane growled out of the corner of her mouth. An ogre in a white shirt looked back over his shoulder at them, and they all did their best to look innocent.

But she had seen. The steely glitter in Rooster's eye had nothing to do with him. It was dragon's light that shone there, the alien intelligence of 7332 acting within him. He had been taken over, and made into a tool, one that 7332 could use for its own inscrutable purposes.

Don't don't don't, she prayed in her head. Don't do it Rooster, don't let yourself be used like this, and to the dragon she prayed, don't make him do this, don't, and to the Goddess: don't. Stop time, stop motion, unmake the world, halt the sun in its circuit, don't let this go on.

Now that she was alerted to it, she could feel the dragon's influence everywhere about them, a pervasive fluid medium within which they all moved, like fish in a hostile ocean. She could tell from the rigid set of Rooster's back that he was staring at the prototype. Now, too late, she realized that the evenings spent with the grimoire had not been wasted time on Rooster's part; they had created an opening through which 7332 might move and influence him.

The plant manager shook hands with the inspector general, and introduced the comptroller. The elf-lord worked his way gracefully down the line, making firm eye contact and occasionally reinforcing his handshakes with a small laugh or a pat on the shoulder.

The ceremony proceeded with the deliberate pace of a ritual drama. At one point, Rooster surrendered a bound set of production figures to Blugg, who handed them to the elf-lord, who handed them to the senior of the two Tylwyth Teg, and thus to the junior and finally to the cost accountant who tucked it under his arm without glancing at it. Creep yawned and was savagely elbowed by Dimity.

Finally the officials all turned to the prototype, as if noticing it for the first time. Grimpke unscrewed an access cap, opening up the leg to demonstrate the array of eccentric gears stacked down the core. "Verra important," he said. " 'Swod magesutt work, yasee?" One of the upper management types winced, but the expression on the inspector general's face was encouraging, bland, smiling. Grimpke reached into the grease to show how tightly packed the gears were, and light glinted between his fingers.

He screamed.

Bright, actinic power flared from the center of the assembly. It swallowed up and engulfed those closest to it. Suits and faces dissolved in the light. A hardhat bounced on the floor and rolled away. Everything moved. Flames arose. All this in an instant of perfect silence.

Then the world shattered.

Warm air slammed into Jane's face and she staggered backward; it was like being knocked over with a pillow. Her ears were deafened, ringing. She felt split and divided, her vision fractured into too many images to accept at once: The Tylwyth Teg ablaze, running, falling. A lesser giant doubling over with hysterical, disbelieving laughter. Something tumbling through the air. Cinder blocks bursting, spraying gravel and chips of paint.

Hazy grey smoke filled the room, and the black stench of burning PCBs. Alarms wailed.

In the center of the geysering sparks, Blugg stood as a man stricken. A pillar in a chaotic sea, he stood motionless, while the light passed beyond and through him. One arm slowly rose, as if there were a point he wanted to raise. Then he fell apart, crumbling into grey ash.

Dimity shrieked as a spray of slivers dotted a curve across her face, a graceful line that neatly avoided her lips, nose, and both eyes by coming within a hair of marring them all. Other children were leaping, dancing in quickstep pain, slapping at arms or sides.

But Jane was looking at none of them. She stared, as it seemed she must always have been staring from the beginning of time, at Rooster. His body, reduced and thin, like a piece of paper that, purpose served, has been wadded up and thrown down, lay upon the floor. Only she in all the room had seen him lifted up and then dropped by the release of the power within as it left him. It had happened in that instant just before the explosion.

She stared at Rooster, and he was dead.

The children had instinctively clustered together. Amid all the smoke and flames, the screams and shouted orders, Dimity said with gentle wonder, "Blugg's dead."

"And Rooster." The shadow-boy spoke from somewhere behind her. "They've gone to Spiral Castle together."

The strangeness of this, the improbability of two such fates being mingled, held them all silent for an instant. Finally Thistle asked, "What do we do now?"

She was looking straight at Dimity, pleadingly. But Dimity did not reply. The accident had frightened her as much as the others. She trembled, stunned and shaken, her face pale as snow and dotted with blood where the splinters had hit her. Some leader, Jane thought sourly.

A donkey-eared supervisor in torn white shirt staggered by, touching them each on the shoulder in passing, as though he would fall down without the handhold. "Stay here," he said. "There'll be a safety officer along any minute now. He'll want to interview you." He disappeared into the smoke.

Then the dragon was within Jane again, filling her with purpose and strength. "Form up!" she snapped. "Line up by size. Square off. Lead out!" Meekly, they obeyed.

Jane marched them out of the shop and across the grounds. Rescue forces were still converging on the erecting shop. Ambulances screamed. Flashing lights filled the night, and the stenches from the explosion. The loaders and trucks were all stirring restlessly in their stables, crying out with alarmed mechanical voices. The children walked through the chaos as if enchanted, protected by their purposeful air. Nobody stopped them.

Jane marched them, some—the littlest ones—still hacking and coughing, back to Building 5. There were quiet sobs and sniffs, and those were all right, but when Skizzlecraw threw back her head and began to wail, Jane whacked her a good one right on the ear. That shut her up.

At the dormitory stairs, Jane stepped inside and hustled them before her with snarls and shoves. As the last—it was Creep, of course—went by, she snagged the first-aid kit from its hook just outside Blugg's door.

The first order of business was bandaging up wounds. Fortunately, few of the children had been injured by the explosion; the trauma was mostly from shock. When she came to clean up Dimity's face, the shifter broke out of her frozen apathy and cried, "My face! What am I going to look like?"

"A freak," Jane said, "if I don't tweeze these things out. Shut up and let me work."

She did as good a job as she could manage with the tools at hand. There were still a few black specks under Dimity's skin when she was done, but most likely they were nothing serious. She dosed the more hysterical of the children with morphine, and then she sent them all to bed.

Jane was their leader now.

But not, if she could help it, for long.

When the children were all at last asleep, Jane climbed up to the roof to watch over the unfolding events. Smoke and sparks belched from the smokestacks, and rescue machines prowled restlessly about the grounds. The death of so important a figure as the inspector general had roused all the plant to action, whether productive or not.

Slowly, order reasserted itself. Thaumaturges emerged from the labs and walked through the grounds in orange environmental suits, scattering particulate radioisotopes from thuribles and censers and muttering incantations that stiffened the air with dread. In their wake, the ground was crisscrossed with ley lines glowing blue and red and yellow, like a wiring diagram gone mad, all overlapping circles and straight lines meeting at unlikely angles, then separating again. It was impossible to see how they could expect to untangle the readings of magickal influence, and apparently they could not, for none of the lines was tracked back to Number 7332.

Jane watched for half the night from the rooftop, fearful the dragon would be unmasked. She was a small and pale pip on the black expanse of tar, and if anyone saw her, they must've taken her for a warehouse tutelary about her legitimate business.

When the moon had sunk low in the sky, 7332 finally called for her.

Calmly, Jane climbed down from the roof, gathered up grimoire, crystal and nugget, and dressed. She let herself out of the dormitory with Blugg's key, stepping outside without a glance to either side, and headed for her dragon. She walked straight across the grounds, making no attempt to avoid detection. She was no longer afraid of the plant's security forces. That was 7332's job, not hers.

When she came to the marshalling yard, the great dragons crawled aside to let her pass. They were too proud to look directly, but more than one glanced sidelong at her, their expressions haughty and unreadable. Their navigation lights were bright strings of red, green and white tracing the contours of their flanks.

Jane reached Number 7332 and climbed its side. She felt invisible.

Soft lights came on as she stepped into the cab. There would be no protective camouflage tonight. The door clanged shut behind her.

"You killed him," she said.

From the lightless depths of the machinery came a voice, superficially calm but with undertones of anticipation. "I had to distract the security forces from their normal business long enough to complete my preparations. You needn't mourn the spilling of a little elf blood."

For a second the response made no sense. Then Jane realized that 7332 thought she was talking about the inspector general. "I meant *Rooster!* You used him. You burned him out and threw him away."

"The little one?" 7332 sounded puzzled. "There's nothing special about him. I can get you as many of his kind as you like." Gently, it urged her, "Sit. It's time we left this prison for freedom and the sky."

Numbly, Jane sat down in the chair, and let the servomechanisms wrap themselves around her. She clutched the black handgrips and gave the left-hand one a quarter-turn. Twin needles slid into her wrist. Vision swam and transformed, and she was looking through the dragon's eyes, feeling the cool winter breeze on its iron hide through its nervous system. She was no longer entirely Jane, but part of something much bigger than she alone could ever be. It felt good.

"Power up engine systems," she said.

"That's the spirit!" Fuel gurgled as electrical motors pumped it to the turbines. A high-pitched whine grew and grew until it filled the universe. If it hadn't been for the padded headphones, Jane would have been deafened.

"We're ready. Now insert the keys," 7332 said.

Jane flicked a line of switches off and on, checking that the navigational systems were operative. "That's not necessary," the dragon said testily. "All you need do is insert the keys."

Suddenly an inhuman voice howled. A second voice joined the first, and then a third as alarms went off all across the plant. Lesser, but more piercing voices bayed and yelped. The cyborg hounds. That could only mean that they had been discovered. With the turbines powered up, the tangled lines of force and influence leading back to source must be lit up like so many neon tubes. "Quickly!" 7332 said. "We've been discovered."

The ruby crystal and the walnut were both in Jane's hip pocket; she was uncomfortably half-sitting on them. But she didn't move to take them out. "Tell me your name."

A troll from plant security appeared at the far end of the yard, flames in his eyes. He was followed by several more of his kind, black forms against a cold sky. They each held five or six cyborg hounds straining against titanium leashes.

"They're coming. We must leave now, or not at all."

"Your name," she insisted.

The cyborg hounds were released. They sped, baying, at the dragon. The first of them bounced against its side with a loud *clang* and sank diamond teeth into its side. Submerged as she was in 7332's sensorium, Jane felt the fangs in her own flesh. She cried out loud with pain.

Desperation finally entered 7332's voice. "If we don't leave now, they'll have us!" It kicked at the hound, sending it flying. But more were arriving, hot on its heels.

"That they will."

The hounds were leaping into the air to seize the dragon. 7332 twisted around to face them, almost throwing Jane out of her chair. Its turbines were screaming, and still it could not configure for flight. Shouts of anger and fierce commands came from the trollish warriors. 7332 damped down the circuits carrying sensation from its skin; Jane felt herself go numb all over in sympathetic identification. Still, the hounds were starting to do real damage. *"The keys!"*

Jane waited. Half submerged into the dragon as she was, and uncertain of her identity around the edges, of where she ended and it began, she was sure it must know that she was not bluffing. That without a name, without the control it would give her, they were going nowhere.

"Melanchthon, of the line of Melchesiach, of the line of Moloch!" the dragon cried. Its anguish rose about Jane like phantom flame. She felt her eyelashes singeing in his wrath, and knew down to her very core that it spoke the truth.

She flipped open the grimoire, riffled through the pages to the command codes and began to read: "Recurvor. Recusadora. Recusamor." The engines roared and shuddered. "Recussus. Redaccendo. Redactamos." Jane slapped the crystal into place. "Redadim. Redambules. Redamnavit." The dragon trembled with repressed power. She fitted the brass nugget into its receptor niche, and rotated the right-hand grip a quarter-turn forward. Now the needles were deep within both her wrists. "Now fly!"

"You'll burn in Hell for this humiliation!" 7332 promised. Remembered war atrocities flashed at the back of Jane's skull. "I'll feed you to the Teind with my own claws."

"Shut up and fly!"

They were moving. The tarmac grumbled under their weight as they picked up speed. The dragon's wings raised, deployed, caught at the air. Hounds fell away. Jane was laughing hysterically and so, to her surprise, was 7332.

He lifted.

Shuddering, they took flight. The factory walls moved toward them slowly, then quickly, and then flashed by underneath, alarmingly close. They were free of the plant altogether. Slowly, they gained height.

The last of the hellhounds lost its grip, and fell yapping to its death. A calm, unaccented elven voice spoke over the radio, from some faraway control tower: *You are violating industrial airspace. Surrender all autonomous functions immediately.*

Now Melanchthon screamed his battle-cry over all frequencies, scrambling communications, jamming radar, scratching an ionized line high up into the stratosphere. Far below them, civil defense forces scrambled, flights of war-hardened creatures eager for another taste of combat clawing at the air, but too late.

Jane was laughing so hard now she was crying. She couldn't stop thinking of Rooster, couldn't drive the sight of his small, still body from her mind. Her emotions were so extreme, so chaotic, she could not tell which were hers and which the dragon's. It did not matter. What 7332 felt could be no more intense than what was happening inside her now. She was burning with joy.

They *soared.* ●

NEXT ISSUE

Although it's July as I'm sitting here actually *writing* these words, in the Wonderful World of Magazine Publishing, with its long lead-times, it's our December issue that's coming up next, and *that* means that, in keeping with long tradition, we're bringing you a Christmas story next month—in fact, we're bringing you *three* of them! First, multiple Hugo and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis** returns with a wry, funny, and ultimately quite moving look at some unexpected detours that crop up along the way to history's most overbooked "Inn." Then **Alexander Jablokov** takes us into the far future and across the Galaxy to an exotic alien planet where the settlers from Old Earth still keep Christmas in their hearts, sort of—although a *very* strange Holiday Celebration it's become, as the centuries have passed and memories of Earth have blurred and mutated, as you'll see in this evocative look at "The Last Castle of Christmas." Finally, **Ian McDowell** returns to these pages after a long absence with a good old-fashioned Christmas Ghost Story, this one a poignant encounter with "Some Old Lover's Ghost."

We turn away from seasonal concerns (with a muttered "Bah, Humbug!" perhaps? Oh, go *ahead!*) for the *rest* of our jam-packed issue:

Hot new writer **Mary Rosenblum** takes us into a troubled future for a fast-paced tale of intrigue and confrontation set in a seedy and dangerous "Bordertown"; new writer **Kij Johnson** makes an evocative *Asimov's* debut with the bittersweet story of what can happen when you fall under the spell of "Fox Magic"; popular new writer **Jonathan Lethem** invites us along to a Wild Party in a decadent, high-tech future where *nothing* is as it seems and the guest-list features quite a few surprises, in the wry and razor-sharp "'Forever,' Said the Duck"; **John Alfred Taylor** makes a chilling *Asimov's* debut with the terrifying story of a man pursued relentlessly by the deadly spectre of "The Shorn Lamb"; and new writer **Mark Bourne** makes an impressive *Asimov's* debut with a joyful examination of all the parts of "Being Human" that *really* count, even in the strangest and most bewildering of futures. *Plus,* a Guest Editorial by **Pat Cadigan,** one of our most popular writers, who takes an incisive look at Cyberpunk from the perspective of "Ten Years After," *and* an array of other columns and features. Look for our December issue on sale on your newsstands on October 12, 1993.

ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

OTHER PLANETS

STOPPING AT SLOWYEAR
Frederik Pohl
Bantam Spectra, $3.50, 154pp.
THEBES OF THE HUNDRED GATES
Robert Silverberg
Bantam Spectra, $3.50, 120pp.
A MILLION OPEN DOORS
John Barnes
Tor, $19.95, 315pp.
MUTAGENESIS
Helen Collins
Tor, $21.95, 339pp.
RAINBOW MAN
M.J. Engh
Tor $17.95, 251pp.
KINGDOMS OF THE WALL
Robert Silverberg
Bantam, $22.95, 307pp.
RED MARS
Kim Stanley Robinson
Bantam, $22.50, 461pp.

Surely, if anything may be said to be central to everyone's perception of the nature of science fiction, cognoscenti and general public alike, it is that much of it takes place on other planets. This is such a truism that we hardly even think about it. But maybe we should.

For while it can hardly be contended by anyone that science fiction may be defined by extraterrestrial setting, let alone by a writer like myself who has set most of his fictional oeuvre on Earth, it *is* legitimate to contend that any fiction set on another planet is science fiction.

Admittedly, since 1969 it has been barely possible to set historical fiction on the moon, but as of this writing, and, alas, it would seem for decades to come, one cannot go beyond the Earth-Luna system without entering the realm of science fiction.

You will notice I say "science fiction" and not "SF," for the latter has long since devolved into a marketer's logo to be slapped on everything from pseudo-medieval fantasy to splatterpunk gore and, yes, science fiction as well.

And you can't write fantasy set on other planets.

Not exactly.

Yes, yes, I know such a contention sounds rather ridiculous on the face of it. Of course anyone can sit down at the keyboard and write any damn thing they please, and of course you can put vampires on Mars, or dragons on Pern, and make it work literarily.

But science fiction implies, indeed is arguably confined by, a restriction to which fantasy is not subject, namely that however outré the story or setting, it must remain within the realm of what the writer can convince the reader is possible. It must stay within *this* universe, though the definition of "universe" can get pretty rubbery at times. Generally speaking, though there are always exceptions, and whether the "alternate world tale" is science fiction or fantasy can be endlessly and fruitlessly debated, the other worlds of science fiction are *planets*.

The other worlds of fantasy, on the other hand, being free from the laws and restrictions of our quotidian universe, can be anywhen and anywhere or nowhen and nowhere. Middle Earth. Discworld. Faery. Amber. Whatever.

Fantasy may be set on other planets as well as anywhere else or nowhere in particular, but it doesn't *need* them as settings or literary devices. And when it does use them, it tends to either transmogrify fantasy imagery into science fiction, as with Anne McCaffrey's dragons, whose scientific rationalization was aided and midwifed by no less than John W. Campbell, Jr., or transforms science fiction imagery into fantasy, as with David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus,* much of C.S. Lewis, or Ray Bradbury's Mars.

Science fiction, however, *does* need other planets, both as settings and literary devices; not all science fiction, of course, but a good deal of it.

Other planets are science fiction's other worlds.

This is so obvious that it sounds like a tautology. But it really isn't, once its meaning is expanded.

"Other planets," of course, are physical bodies of a certain debatable mass orbiting our star or others, or, arguably, large enough gas giant satellites. The phrase "other worlds," however, at least in English, encompasses a lot more territory, existent and otherwise.

Other planets to be sure, but also other realities. The "world" of the supernatural. The "world" of magic. Disc "world." The "World" Jones Made. The "World" Beyond the Hill. The "world" on the other side of Lewis Carroll's looking glass. The "worlds" of the Simpsons or Disney or R. Crumb. The "world" of pure imagination.

The worlds of fantasy, of surrealism, of unfettered and uncircumscribed imagination, where the rules and laws of our universe do not apply, where, indeed, *no* coherent set of rules or natural laws need apply at all.

If fantasy may be defined as literature set anywhere or anywhen but the realistic here and now or the historical past, then science fiction may be defined as that subset of fantasy fiction in which the known natural laws of the universe *do* apply, or at least that subset of fantasy in which one of the jobs of the writer is to convince the reader that, however bizarre the setting and events may be, that they do.

Or, in plainer terms, fantasy is the art of the impossible, whereas science fiction, like politics, is the art of the possible. Not necessarily the *probable,* but the possible.

So the other worlds of science fiction tend to be planets, though of course they can also be artificial habitats, or even "virtual realities" like "cyberspace." And, of course, the other planet can be Earth, a year, a decade, a century, a millennium, or long aeons up the timeline.

But if one had to name *the* central literary devide of science fiction, it would surely be the tale set on another planet. Even the literary spaceship was mainly invented as a means of getting us there.

Literarily speaking, the extraterrestrial setting, like the far-future terrestrial setting, or, for that matter, the more recent invention of virtual reality, allows science fiction to operate with pretty much the literary freedom of fantasy *within* the physical realm of the possible.

In a certain sense, at least one stream of science fiction set on other planets is a direct descendant of the old terrestrial utopia that goes all the way back to Plato's *Republic*, set on a mythical island out there somewhere, or any number of seventeenth and eighteenth century versions set in the blank spaces on the map of the Earth. By the nineteenth century, though, lost civilizations in Africa or South America had little remaining geographical credibility, and these days even a pocket universe like Shangri-la way up there in the Himalayas is a dubious proposition.

So if you want to set up a society on some outré basis somewhere and run your characters through it, best to put it on some other planet where the real estate is a lot cheaper and the zoning laws much more free and easy.

In much of this kind of fiction, the other planet functions primarily as a literary device, either as a place to set up a society for didactic purposes, or as a setting in which the story can work, and hopefully both.

A story like Frederik Pohl's *Stopping at Slowyear,* for example, could hardly exist without the planet Slowyear, so named for its nineteen (terrestrial)-year orbit. The slower-than-light merchant starship *Nordvik* visits Slowyear. Crewmember Mercy MacDonald, tired of starship life, contemplates getting off on Slowyear permanently, goes planetside, becomes involved with a local politician, and at the end, there is a plot twist which explains why *nobody* leaves Slowyear.

If you think that this sounds like a pretty thin storyline to sustain a novel, you are right; *Stopping at Slowyear* is one of the novellas that Spectra has been publishing as free-standing paperbacks. If you think such a story might be a bit overblown even at novella length, you are right too.

I have no idea how Pohl actually conceived this novella, but it reads like a rather common sort of hybrid, a short story expanded to novella length with a planetary portrait largely extraneous to the plot and even mostly extraneous to the character relationships.

Stopping at Slowyear climaxes in the sort of trick revelation ending that works nicely at short story length but is a bit much, or rather perhaps a bit not enough, at 151 pages. It is a novella in length only; formally it is a short story.

Since this is the story of a starship crew's encounter with a planetary society, Pohl had to create a planet for them to encounter. In terms of the story Pohl set out to tell, except for one element which I do not feel at liberty to reveal, the geological, political, and social nature of the planet and its civilization didn't really much matter.

But somewhere along the way, as commonly happens in this sort of thing, perhaps because he had a commission to do a novella, not a short story, or perhaps, for all I know, because the notion of Slowyear and its culture came first and the story later, Frederik Pohl's major focus shifted to an exploration of the planet and its society.

What started out as a literary device needed to tell a certain story ended up in the foreground. Pohl surely must have been familiar with Brian Aldiss' Heliconia trilogy, in which the seasons on the fictional planet outlast generations. Okay, then, what would be the social, political, cultural, and psychological consequences of living on a planet where the seasons lasted, oh, say, about five years?

As I've said, fiction like this is a descendant of the old utopian novels of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and to an extent the nineteenth century, but it *has* evolved literarily and even philosophically in the process.

The society that Frederik Pohl sets up on Slowyear is neither utopian nor dystopian but the extrapolated consequence of the physical situation the human colonists find themselves dropped down into. Whereas the utopian novel, and its mirror-image the dystopia, use the displaced setting, whether blank spot on the old terrestrial map or some posited other planet, to depict a society in theoretical extremis for some didactic purpose, what Pohl has written here is uniquely science fictional.

Not a moral fable or a political screed, *Stopping at Slowyear,* and many works like it, is a bit like a laboratory experiment. Choose a set of physical planetary givens, drop a population down into them, and explore the political, cultural, and psychological consequences.

As with many such works, the planet Slowyear seems somewhat oversimplified and schematic if you look at it too closely. Pohl has adopted the common device of making it a sparsely populated colony planet, which enables him to confine himself to a couple of modest-sized cities and some countryside and justify it as a world entire.

At novelette or novella length, this can work out well as long as the story remains in the foreground, or, if it doesn't, if the restrictive device is used to make the narrow angle planetary mise en scène vividly alive. In *Stopping at Slowyear,* however, the story is a bit thin to carry the length, and the planet and its culture seem a tad too generic to move front and center, the result being a tale that is somewhat too slow-moving and sketchily realized to be entirely successful.

To see what I mean, contrast *Stopping at Slowyear* with *Thebes of the Hundred Gates* by Robert Silverberg, another little novella-length book in the same series. Here the "other world" is the ancient Egyptian city of the title and Silverberg has used an even thinner plot than Pohl, dropping a time-traveler back into Thebes to bring back illegal defectors from the future and becoming charmed and co-opted himself in the process.

But what Silverberg was after here is readily apparent and sharply focused, namely to paint a verbal picture of ancient Thebes so finely detailed, so rich, so enticing, that the reader, like Silverberg's viewpoint character, like, apparently, Robert Silverberg himself, will be utterly seduced by it.

True, *Thebes of the Hundred Gates* is really a kind of historical novella in science fictional drag, and its vivid intensity is achieved not so much by inventive imagination as by pouring what must have been a daunting amount of historical and archeological scholarship into this comparatively small container. But it is, nevertheless, illustrative of the successful application of the literary technique. If Thebes had never existed and Silverberg had made it all up out of bits and pieces of this and that or even whole cloth, the effect on the majority of readers who are not Egyptologists would have not been that much different.

"World-building," this is generally called. It is often done for its own sake as Silverberg seems to have done here, and while in one sense, as Silverberg demonstrates, it is not unique to science fiction, in another sense perhaps it is.

Historical fiction certainly resurrects the worlds of the past, and, when well done, both vividly and accurately. Fantasy builds worlds out of the stuff of the imagination, often puissantly. But only science fiction engages in a strange sort of archeology, anthropology, and sociology *of the future,* using the tools of the fantasist, the historian, and the scientist too, to create imaginary worlds that at least seem to have the verisimilitude, detail, color, and psychological reality of the recreated past.

In theory, at least. In practice, of course, reach most often exceeds grasp.

John Barnes' *A Million Open Doors* has been well-received in its entirety in certain quarters and indeed well-received by yours truly for about the first quarter of its length. And therein lies the tale. Or two of them. And for me, at least, that is the problem.

In Barnes' set-up, the "springer," an instantaneous teleportation device, has created the million open planetary doors of the title. In theory, at least. In practice, slower-than-light means are needed to set up new springer stations, so human expansion into the galaxy is proceeding at an Einsteinian pace. This still leaves humans with enough planets for all sorts of groups to establish their own planetary societies as utopian experiments, cultist theocracies, self-conscious recreations of old Terrestrial societies, the so-called Thousand Cultures. A metaphor for science fiction itself, you might say, though mercifully Barnes doesn't.

The novel opens on the planet Nou Occitan and is narrated in its entirety in first person by Giraut, who at least begins the tale as a bravo thereof, a dueling, swaggering, poeticizing, neo-romantic, neo-troubador.

The culture of Nou Occitan, indeed the planetary biosphere and geosphere itself, still in the process of alteration, is not so much an attempt at recreating the late medieval terrestrial template that produced the troubadours as it is the use of the historical Aquitaine as a springboard to create a new culture as a deliberate work of art, a kind of Disneyworld in reverse, even *more* colorful, *more* baroque, *more* romantic, more *everything*, than the original.

In this part of the book, John Barnes does for Nou Occitan what Robert Silverberg does for Thebes in *Thebes of the Hundred Gates* and perhaps then some. Science fiction though it be, it must have taken a similar amount of research, for Barnes takes the details of old Occitan culture, even the language, and uses it just as his fictional planetary culture designers have—to extrapolate a modernized, artistically enhanced, vividly realized, lovingly detailed, attractive synthetic planet.

A terrific job of world-building, in which the story of manners, such as it is, such as they are, is merely a successful exploratory vehicle.

And then the plot involves Giraut in some unfortunate business which gets him exiled to the planet Caledony.

Caledony is a bummer of a planet run by a really dumb cultist theocracy which seems like a heavy-handed take on laissez faire capitalist silliness run wild, and therefore exists on a much lower literary reality level than Nou Occitan. Where Nou Occitan comes across as a living, breathing, lovingly realized world, Caledony is a schematic two-dimensional dystopia, not much more than a political cartoon.

The story, which has never quite been front and center to begin with, devolves into the old rebels-against-the-system plot. Worse still, at least the way Barnes has realized it, though Caledony is both less fully realized and far grimmer than Nou Occitan, Giraut nevertheless stepwise comes to see his old homeworld as hopelessly jejune, callow, over-baroque, over-romantic, while Caledony, for all its unattractiveness, teaches him lessons about responsibility, maturity, his place in the larger earnest scheme of things.

Phooey!

I say it's spinach, and I say the hell with it.

Not that it couldn't have worked. Had Barnes done the same careful and detailed job of world-building with Caledony as he did on Nou Occitan, had there been enough depth there for hidden things of value, of beauty, of real worth, to have stepwise emerged, Giraut's maturation into responsible adulthood, his conversion of loyalties, his jaundiced retrospective on the planet of his youth, might at the very least have been credible.

But for John Barnes to have done that, he would have had to have loved his vision of Caledony as he loved his vision of Nou Occitan, ideological protestations of its adolescent callowness to the contrary. And it is obvious that he didn't.

In a way *A Million Open Doors* puts me in mind of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. There, her anarchist utopia, the planet Anarres, if not as colorfully done and detailed as Barnes's Nou Occitan, is manifestly the object of her intellectual affection, whereas its counterpoised sister planet, the dystopian Urras, like Caledony, is a much less believably realized political cartoon of a world.

The planet Anu in Helen Collins's *Mutagenesis* is rather simplified and cartoony too, more so, maybe, but this novel is representative of a different sort of use to which the other planet setting is often put, or to look at it the other way around, the sort of story which requires a made-up planetary setup to exist.

Here the geographical, ecological, and biological world-building is held to a pro-forma minimum, and the focus is on the human colony and Dr. Mattine Manan of the expedition from Earth which arrives to reestablish contact and study it.

This, then, is a kind of anthropological science fiction, not the sort epitomized by much of the work of Chad Oliver, where the human anthropologists confront a mysterious alien culture, but a kind of *experimental* anthropological science fiction, where a human colony with certain starting parameters is set up in a fairly neutral planetary laboratory, lost or abandoned for a few centuries or so, and then revisited by scientists who study the results of its evolution in isolation.

On Anu, the Plain culture has evolved, or devolved, into a kind of neo-primitive, neo-Puritan, male chauvinist dystopia, something like a Quaker or Mennonite community gone rather fascist-minded and sour, also a bit reminiscent, somehow, of the society in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* transposed to a more countrified setting.

The Plain people are aided in their endeavors by "losos," mute, obedient, neuter products of the genetic manipulation of the more technologically advanced culture of the East, that is, creatures tailored to be slaves, whose ultimate nature is one of the central mysteries of the novel.

The plot of *Mutagenesis* is basically the familiar odyssey of discovery, in which the anthropologist, the rebellious refugee from the repressive society, the escaped slaves, and so forth, must fight their way across the landscape toward the center, toward the East, toward final confrontation with those whose machinations have mostly created this warped and unpleasant constellation of societies.

The planet Anu is not all that interesting in world-building terms—the cultures are pretty schematic, the plot more or less familiar, but the biological speculation is rather interesting, the characters much realer and more finely rendered than the setting, and Collins manages to use their viewpoints and relationships as a vehicle for some interesting meditations on, among other things, gender roles and the artistic personality, without falling very far into didacticism, at least not until the plot-line climax.

Mutagenesis, while it does not really sing as fiction, nor enchant on a world-building level, is a pretty successful example of the other planet setting used as a necessary framework for a novel whose primary interest is intellectual, whose secondary interest is characterological, with the storyline third, the local color at best a distant fourth.

One could say that say that these are unavoidably the four basic elements of the other planet novel in no universally inherent order of importance: world-building, story, character, intellectual speculation. Sometimes the emphasis is on one, sometimes on another, sometimes on some partial combination. One need not balance them equally in order to succeed. Such fiction can be successful with any of them front and center, as long as whatever *is* chosen as the literary foreground is rendered with a passion, skill, and intensity that holds the interest. Science fiction can succeed as a fiction of ideas, or of character, or of exploration of the exotic, and *any* fiction can succeed as a fiction centered on story.

Of course science fiction that succeeds in conveying all four elements in a balanced manner with the same high level of passion, intensity, and skill can do more than merely succeed as fiction, it can attain a certain level of literary memorability.

There are those who contend that M.J. Engh attained that memorability with *Arslan*, but I am not among them. For me, it was a theoretical exploration of the nature of charismatic power that was interesting, but whose anti-hero was not convincingly charismatic or intellectually credible, whose future America was rather vague, and whose story therefore failed to quite come alive, seeing as how it was centered on the means by which the former conquered the latter.

Her new novel, *Rainbow Man*, however, is a quantum leap forward. Here is the other planet story that succeeds on all levels, putting a unique and interesting character into a well-built world where her emotional interaction with local people and culture involves her in a compelling story that carries the weight of the thematic material.

The Rainbow Man of the title is in fact a woman. Liss, like Frederik Pohl's Mercy MacDonald, is a crewperson off a generation starship disaffected with the galactic rolling-stone life, but unlike MacDonald, she has effectively marooned herself on the planet Bimran as the novel opens.

Liss herself narrates the novel in first person, and she is something of an educated galactic sophisticate with philosophical depths and a sense of irony; if not necessarily an alter-ego of the writer, then the sort of first-person lead who allows the writer full voice for her own.

The starship culture she comes from has its good news and bad. Slower-than-light ships and the time-dilation effect allow and indeed mandate planet-hopping through time as well as space —stay on board for the millennial cakewalk through the planet-bound histories of the galaxy.

But on the other hand, you can never really go back to where you've ever been, because by the time you get there the people you had known will be long gone and the planetary culture with which you had been acquainted will have mutated back to the shock of the alien.

And if you leave your ship for a taste of how the planet side lives, you can never go home to it again, for by the time it reaches its next planetary port, you yourself will be one with the dinosaurs.

Nevertheless Liss chooses to get off on Bimran, knowing that while she may be able to sign on on the next starship through if there is one, since all generation starships are in one way or another their own unique cultures, too, she is leaving everything she has ever known irrevocably behind her.

Why she does it is, fortunately, not susceptible to plot summarization, for Engh makes the starship culture believable and real by allowing it moral complexity, and Liss' exile of herself from it is both gain and loss.

So, too, but in a somewhat different way, is the planet Bimran brought to spiritual life.

Though a country boy might complain that her planetary focus is a bit too urban, Engh makes Bimran both vividly real and attractive, obviously no utopia, maybe somewhat too Marin County for a girl from galactic gotham, but a society that seems to work, humanly, economically, artistically, ecologically.

Of course there are warts, or at least that's what they look like at first, beginning with the odd notion that Liss' sterilization renders her legally non-female, that is, male. And that for the men of Bimran this indeed renders sexual congress with her the moral and esthetic equivalent of homosexuality. And that the public order and tranquility is kept by means which she and the reader find unjustly sadistic and outrageously random.

Through a wealth of detail—visual, geographic, architectural, cultural, artistic—Engh renders Bimran City as a place as real and welcoming as San Francisco or Toronto or Amsterdam, a place anyone would like to visit for an extended period whether they'd want to settle there or not.

Engh does this partly by sheer craft with color and detail, partly by the unusual attention to *artistic* detail of the culture, partly by fairly three-dimensional characterization of the Bimranian characters, and party by rendering elements of the superficially sunny planetary culture as incomprehensibly opaque to Liss as to the reader. After all, if *you* got off the 747 in Bangkok or Lagos, it might take you a while to figure out what was going on, too.

What is going on in general on Bimran, not to give too much away, is what arguably tends to go on in general in any human society, namely that there are worms in the karmic apple of even those societies that seem to be among the best.

Perhaps this is the human condition, or, turned around, the imperfect condition that humans inevitably create when they evolve a culture.

What ultimately makes *Rainbow Man* so satisfying is that M.J. Engh allows Bimran the dignity of a tragic flaw. Or is it a *necessary* flaw? For even the discovery of the awful secret at its heart in the end does not render Bimran relatively ugly or even unsuccessful in the real universal spectrum of human societies.

Perhaps such a cultural flaw is both tragic *and* necessary, a question which is part of what Engh explores here.

This is not a perfect novel. It concludes with the only extended action sequence in the book, which seems rather out of character and out of tone, turning the climax into a bit too much of a thrilling escape from the baddies closure, but it succeeds as a work of literature in the end as much by what it refrains from doing as by what it does.

What it refrains from doing is deconstructing the cultures it creates, even when there are dark things discovered in their hearts. Like most real human cultures, neither the culture of the starships nor the culture of Bimran are good or evil. Like most human cultures, they just *are*. Existing in relative degrees of moral ambiguity, relative measures of success in maintaining public welfare, individual happiness, artistic creativity, spiritually and morally compromised at their cores perhaps, but all the more spiritually alive for it.

And hence, imbued with the breath of real life as literary creations.

Another sort of other planet story seeks to carry this even further, to turn itself into the science fictional version of a vision quest, a bildungsroman of spiritual development through a mystic landscape made manifest or a Conradian descent into the dark heart of its mystery or somehow both.

In one form or another, Robert Silverberg has written quite a few novels and stories in this mode. He has written quite a few novels and stories in other, even contrary, modes, too, but if there is a dominant theme in his work, a characteristic form, it is arguably this visionary walkabout through an exotically extraterrestrial dreamtime, Kipling or Haggard rewritten by Joseph Conrad or Hermann Hesse or Jack Kerouac.

Needless to say, or perhaps, alas, not so needless, Silverberg didn't exactly invent this form of tale, nor did science fiction. Chez Joseph Campbell, it is the tale we all seek to tell ourselves, the hero or heroine of which we all seek to be, the very plot wheel that spins out the myths and folktales of all cultures, the ur-story of the species.

But what science fiction *has* done is re-energize the puissance of this archetypal mythic vision quest tale by concretizing it into a form that the modern (or postmodern) mind can find credible. By setting it on another planet, rather than in a metaphorical magic landscape, the science fiction writer removes it from the realm of fantasy, the impossible, and declares that yes, these mystical events can happen to us too, somewhere, somewhen, in this very universe.

This has powerful appeal, arguably *the* central spiritual appeal of science fiction.

While Robert Silverberg is hardly the only writer to mine this vein, he does seem to be one of the writers who does it most knowingly. He's read his Conrad, and his Campbell, he's well-versed in social anthropological lore, he's had some visionary experience of his own, and, generally speaking, he's written this sort of story with power and authority.

In novels like *Downward to the Earth, Lord Valentine's Castle,* and the recent *Face of the Waters,* as well as any number of novelettes and novellas, the Silverbergian protagonist fares through an alien landscape that is both physically real and composed of visionarily charged elements toward an enlightenment (or a failure to achieve same) that is both spiritual and the climax of some arduous physical adventure in the world of Maya.

The latest, *Kingdoms of the Wall,* has been treated less than kindly in certain quarters, and indeed it seems to lack the drive and pacing and spiritual power of most of Silverberg's work in this mode.

Here we have an *alien* first person-narrator, Poilar Crookleg, leading his pilgrim group of Forty on an overt vision quest through an alien landscape on his own planet, the Wall of the title, an enormous mountain, or range of mountains, or collection of mountain ranges, rising far above the quotidian plain to the ultimate pinnacle whereupon reside the gods of his world.

Well, before they even start climbing the Wall, you know that they're embarking on a perilous journey through a mutated landscape toward ultimate apotheosis, for Poilar and the others know this too; it's the formative moment in the life cycle of their species, that's why they're doing it in the first place.

Silverberg's skill and inventiveness with exotic detail is displayed throughout, but something elusive seems to be missing. The various Kingdoms and their denizens are interesting, sometimes shocking, the physical events maintain their narrative tension, but unlike most of Silverberg's other work in this mode, they don't seem to signify anything beyond themselves, they don't seem to be concretized visionary metaphors, though Poilar seems to strain at times to convince himself that they are.

And one is constantly grumbling at both Silverberg and Poilar to get on with it, to peel this onion down to its mysterious core already. And when a wounded "god" turns out to be a human in a spacesuit, a groan does go up, for anyone who has read much science fiction now knows what Poilar will discover at the pinnacle of the Wall and his quest for the godhead.

And, of course, the reader's expectation is not disappointed, though Poilar's certainly is, when the grim and tacky truth is revealed.

This has been taken by some as a certain flagging of energy on Silverberg's part, a spiritual void, a writer putting one of his main tropes passionlessly through the motions one more time.

Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't.

There is another part of Robert Silverberg's oeuvre quite different from his stories of the struggle toward mystical transcendence, and that Silverberg, the Silverberg of *The Masks of Time, The Man in the Maze,* and, most strongly, *Dying Inside,* has a much darker vision, mordant, pessimistic, skeptical, ironic.

Could it be that the effect that *Kingdoms of the Wall* ultimately leaves is *deliberately intended?* Could this novel be *that* Silverberg's jaundiced deconstruction of the other Silverberg's vision quest novels?

The case could be made. The alien landscape and creatures that are surreal enough to be visionary metaphors, that at times seem to hint at such to Poilar, but in the end seem to be meaningless exotic mutations, the arduous climb to the roof of the world, to transcendent enlightenment via confrontation with the godhead, only to learn that the local dieties are creatures no more exalted than our own grubby selves. . . .

To go further would be a mind-reading act. Yet Poilar's final exhortation to his species seems instructive.

". . . there are no other gods within our reach; and if we do not make ourselves gods, then we must live our lifetimes in the absence of gods, which is a terrible thing . . . if only you will accept it, it will set you free."

Is *Kingdoms of the Wall* Silverberg's dialogue with himself? Is it an attempt at synthesis? Is the Silverberg of *Dying Inside* trying to come to terms with the Silverberg of *Downward to the Earth* and *Face of the Waters?*

It will be interesting to see what Silverberg does next. I have the feeling that *Kingdoms of the Wall* is some kind of transitional work. To what, and whether successfully achieved, will only become apparent to the reader, and perhaps even to Robert Silverberg himself, at the other side of the transition.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars,* on the other hand, knows exactly what it is. It is the first part of an epic Martian trilogy designed to portray the history of that planet from the first human colonization to Robinson-only-knows-what three big fat books into the future. And as such, it is that rather rarer form of other planet novel, one set on a *real* planet in *this* solar system taking full account of what we know of its nature, yet making it a venue for a complex, spirited, baroque, and believable civilization anyway.

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Rarely done because rather daunting in the light of modern scientific knowledge. Sure there's a fifty-five-foot shelf of Martian exotica from Burroughs to Bradbury, but there can be no gondola rides down the Grand Canal on Mars as we know it now—a dead ball of admittedly spectacular scenery with no liquid water on the surface, an unbreathable atmosphere too thin to keep H_20 in a liquid phase anyway, and a climate that would literally freeze your unprotected ass off in short order.

So either you write a gritty hard science tale of survival in a toxic frozen environment or throw all those Viking and Mariner photos to the wind and take a magical mystery tour back to good old Barsoom, right?

Wrong.

Hard-SF wise, *Red Mars* is a rigorous hard-SF novel. Robinson seems to know the real Mars as well as he knows Orange County—he's absorbed all the scientific data, and accepts it all as a given. Yet he makes Red Mars, which in its given state could just as well be called Dead Mars, come alive.

This is, of course, what his Martian colonists ultimately hope to achieve too, the terraforming of the planet into a landscape upon which humans may venture naked, or at least with no more than a warm leather jacket and a pair of long-johns. And Robinson has worked out the details of this process most convincingly. From a hard science point of view, you are utterly convinced, that, yeah, these are the ways to do it, it's never been figured out better.

Of course this sort of thing *has* been done before, and done well, the most notable recent example perhaps being *Red Genesis* by S. C. Sykes. And like Robinson, Sykes made her characters vivid and real and believable too, and so too, like Robinson's, was her political matrix all too believable.

That much being said, these are two very different books beyond the technological and Aereological level.

For one thing, while Sykes's protagonist becomes a "Martian" primarily by adapting psychologically to the realities of the planet, Robinson's multiple protagonists seek to adapt the *planet* to the physical, psychological, and spiritual requirements of humanity.

Well, most of them do. A minority of opinion views the terraforming of the planet as the moral equivalent of air conditioning Death Valley, and loves the dead cold wastes just as they were before ever touched by the meddling human hand precisely *because* that was the millennial natural state.

There are struggles, revolts, ultimately warfare with the corporate mercenaries of the home world, whose various energy releases and incidents tend to speed up the terraforming process to the point where it's a good guess that Robinson is going to call the second book *Green Mars,* or at any rate would be justified in so doing.

This colonial conflict, like most such conflicts, is about autonomy, who controls what resources, what interests will rule what part of the planet, and so forth, rather than the question of whether 'tis nobler to preserve even deadly wilderness as one finds it or to seek to mold it closer to the heart's desire, to shamelessly mix literary references.

Nevertheless, Kim Stanley Robinson seems to resolve that one by the time *Red Mars* is concluded in a most satisfying manner.

Elsewhere, notably in his Orange County trilogy and his Nepal stories, Robinson has certainly established his bona fides as one of the science fiction writers most attuned to the landscape, to its beauty, to its psychic impact on culture and character, to its existence as the matrix of not only social and psychological but spiritual life. So it's hard to make a case for Kim Stanley Robinson as an advocate of desecration of the natural realm.

And yet while Robinson gives the Mars of our present, which confronts humans at the outset, the sere and bleak majesty of Death Valley or the Sahara and yes, allows us to mourn the passing of its pristine purity with sympathy, he seems to come down squarely in the camp of the terraformers.

But he does it not from the point of view of the technocrat or the exploitative developer, but from the point of view of a spiritual lover of the land, of Mars—of the "natural" but dead Mars which must disappear, which, must, paradoxically enough, "die," but even more so, of the Mars which is being created, of the green Mars aborning, of, paradoxically enough, the "artificial," man-made Mars quickening to life.

Thus there is a nobility to the terraforming of Mars in Kim Stanley Robinson's vision. He does on a literary level just what his colonists seek to achieve with terraforming technology.

He takes the dead Mars of science, and via the very machineries thereof, quickens its landscape to life, biologically and spiritually, and gives us back something like the Mars of Burroughs and Bradbury, that potential other planet of romance, that other living world, not in the impossible dreams of fantasy, or way out there in some distant yonder, but right here in *this* universe, in *this very solar system*, right up there in probability's night sky, a mere thirty-five-million miles and a few score billion dollars away. ●

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to take her dripping wet in the middle
of a shower, and although she must close

her eyes from the horror of his chameleon
catenations, his instant appendages explore

all the fine nooks and crevices of her body
with such prehensile precision that she can

not fend him off until the water turns cold
and she is polymorphously pleasure-spent.

Just for the fun of it he becomes a chandelier,
a checkerboard Dalmatian, a bearded potentate

with a bejeweled satin turban and *escargot* eyes.
Each time she grows angry with his endless antics

she is suddenly confronting a giant teddy bear,
so darling her arms ache to cuddle him forever.

And when she summons the courage to betray him,
at the moment of a momentous climax, a momentary

respite from his ever altering round of alterations,
he reveals himself as the very stranger in her bed.

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by Erwin S. Strauss

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24-26—**DemiCon. (410) 638-2400.** Sheraton, Towson MD. General/SF/fantasy gaming con.

24-26—**ConTradiction. (716) 285-2290.** Hyatt, Buffalo NY. Nancy Kress, George Alec Effinger.

29-Oct. 1—**Ukraine Nat'l. Con. (044) 228-2434.** Kiev, Ukraine. Theme: SF, Fantasy, The Universe.

OCTOBER 1993

1-3—**ConText, Box 2954, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 253-6089.** Fred Pohl. Written SF/fantasy only.

1-3—**ConChord, % Weiss, 13261 Donegal Dr., Garden Grove CA 92644. (714) 530-3546.** SF folksinging.

1-3—**Rising Star, 545 Howard Dr., Salem VA 34153 (703) 389-9400.** Deanna Lund, L. Cantrell, Boyd.

1-3—**VoCon, % Brialey, 17 Guildford St., Brighton BN1 3LS, UK.** Work of Douglas (Hitchhiker) Adams.

1-3—**FrustCon, Meyer, Bahnhofstr. 5, Ebersbach 7333, Germany. (07163) 6996.** Baden-Wurtemberg.

1-3—**Fantastic Films Fest, % 95 Meadowgate Rd., Salford, Manchester M6 8EN, UK. (061) 707-3747.**

1-3—**FantasyCon, 46 Oxford Rd., Acocks Green, Birmingham B27 6DT, UK.** Peter James, Les Edwards.

1-3—**Salon del Comic, Box 461, Gijon Spain. (85) 351-963.** The Asturias comic con. Dates may slip.

2-3—**Novag, Box 729, Sterling VA 20167.** Elk's Lodge, Fairfax VA. General and SF/fantasy wargames.

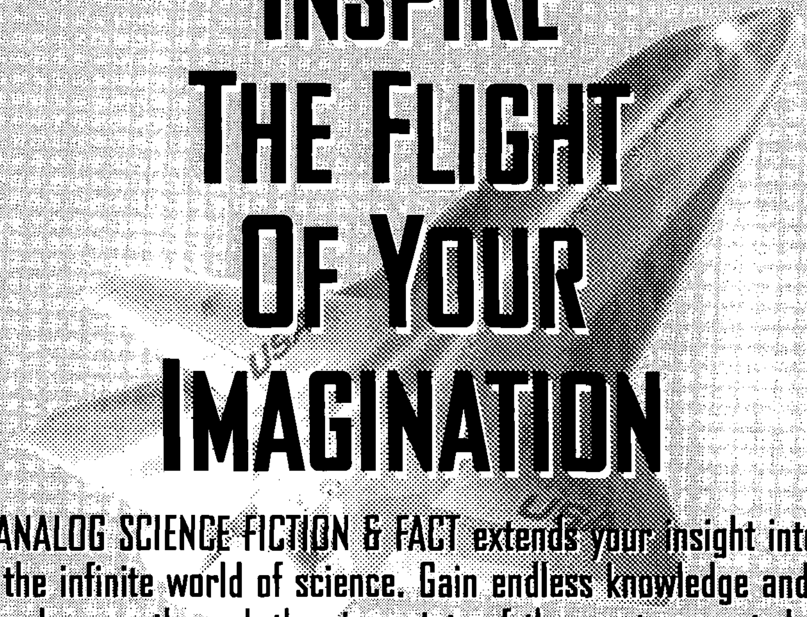
8-10—**ConCat, % 805 College, Knoxville TN 37921. (615) 522-3470.** Octavia Butler, Pat Morrissey.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. C$95/US$85.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003. Glasgow UK.** World SF Convention US$85.



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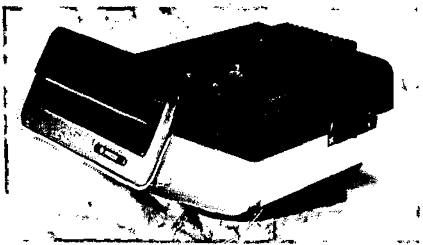

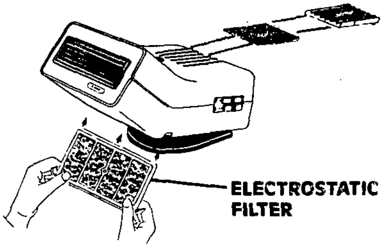

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